

BLACK AIR:
AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO AIRPOWER BEFORE
INTEGRATION

BY
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APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

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DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.

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ABSTRACT

This study shows why the Tuskegee Airmen's mechanics and other support personnel deserve respect for the role they played in this incredible program which focused on creating Black pilots in the Army Air Corps. The Black Pilot plight could not be resolved without a concentration of men and women who served as mechanics, supply clerks, truck drivers, doctors and medical personnel, and weather personnel. These airmen fought two wars. One war was against racism and prejudice and the other was against Axis forces in the skies over Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa. The study shows that racism in the United States did not prevent Blacks from entering the Army Air Corps to fly and fight for their country. They were brave and ready individuals who trained and fought with valor for their rights as citizens and their lives as Airmen.

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Introduction

Then, as now, my love for my own country was strong. I got some comfort out of knowing that I was able to go on fighting on the same front and in the same cause as other citizens of the United States, and so in a roundabout way, I was managing to do my duty and to serve my country.

-- 2nd Lieutenant Eugene Bullard¹

Background

One of the extraordinary elements of the painful and remarkably complex story of Black Airmen in this country was their loyalty to the United States. They remained loyal to concepts: “all men are created equal,” democracy, and the freedom to pursue life, liberty, and happiness, even when they were the most marginal beneficiaries of the very ideas they were defending. This is a story of largely overlooked airmen who served their country with fidelity, bravery, and distinction without a published history. There is something enduring and powerful about the role of Black Airmen in America; so much was taken from them, with so little given in return. It makes their American journey unique and their history rich.

The employment of Black Airmen during both World Wars in support roles and combat operations was remarkable in that it happened at all. The establishment of Negro pilot training in 1939 opened opportunities for progress and eventual equality for Blacks in America’s armed services. During World War II, Black Airmen served in Africa, the Pacific, and Europe. Although often used in menial and supply functions, nevertheless commanders often praised their contributions to the overall victory. When Black Americans went into combat on the beaches of Normandy, in the hills of Italy, and in the jungles of the Pacific, they established a record of pride and achievement.²

¹ Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*. (Athens, GA; University of Georgia Press, 2000), 39.

² Robert E. Greene, *Black Defenders of America 1175-1973* (Chicago, IL; Johnson Publishing Company, Inc, 1974), 185.

The purpose of this research project is to uncover the history of Blacks attempting to gain entrance to the U.S. Air Corps since World War I. Specifically, the contributions of service support roles of Black Airmen made to airpower. Additionally, a subordinate question this paper will examine is: What role did the perception of inferiority, racial discrimination, and segregation have on the training, support, and preparing Black Airmen for combat operations? In 1917, when they tried to enlist in the Air Service, they received the answer that no Colored aero squadrons were being formed at the present time.³ In the next war, the era of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, this era not only produced Black pilots and but a steadily stream of skilled technicians, air mechanics, photographers, radio operators, weathermen, and other essential personnel to the Army Air Forces. The era for training Black pilots and developing Black units was indeed a significant experiment, more perhaps from the sociological angle than from a military one.

When you set your mind to do something, you can usually find a way if you try hard enough.-Cornelius Coffey

This is a story about a fraction of the tens of thousands of African-American men and women in military and civilian groups who supported the Tuskegee Airmen. They served as flight instructors, medical support personnel, bombardiers, navigators, radio technicians, mechanics, air traffic controllers, parachute riggers, and electrical and communications specialists. Support personnel also included laboratory assistants, cooks, musicians, and supply, fire-fighting, and transportation personnel. Their participation helped pave the way for desegregation of the military that began with President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981 in 1948. These soldiers overcame Jim Crow laws, Black Code laws, discrimination, segregation and prejudice to become one of the most highly respected aerial combat groups during this period in U.S. history. They proved conclusively that Blacks could fly and maintain

³ Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*. (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History United States Army, 1966), 55.

sophisticated combat aircraft, and with their hard work and dedication pave the way for full integration of the U.S. military.

Pioneers of Black Aviation

The flight of the Wright Brothers, followed by the historic flight of Charles Lindbergh across the Atlantic, inspired many young Americans to fly, both white and Black. However, racial hatred and discrimination was so deeply entrenched in American life that Blacks were excluded from flight instruction. Despite this denial, Black youths were fascinated with flying and were determined to learn to fly. Several extraordinary young men and women would not be denied their wings. These young Black men and women eventually helped a nation and its leaders look at Blacks in light of their ability to fly, not the color of their skin, despite a lack of resources and opportunities. These courageous civilians opened doors for Blacks to enter the Army Air Corps before World War II. They were as important as the Tuskegee Airmen themselves in helping convince a nation to live up to the ideals and principles of democracy. A list which includes such luminaries as Alfred “Chief” Anderson, Janet Bragg, Cornelius Coffey, Wilma Brown, and Chauncey Spencer is not exclusive, but does exemplify the amazing Black men and women of courage and strength who against all odds were determined to fly. Another young trailblazer who ignored racist barriers and forged her own way, instilling admiration and hope, was Bessie Coleman.

Coleman

Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman was born in 1892, a decade before the first flight of the Wright Brothers. With determination and an unquenchable enthusiasm for flying she set out on an impossible dream to defeat insurmountable odds. Denied by flight schools in the United States, she faced two major obstacles: she was Black and a woman. Bessie was a determined woman who understood the climate and the plight of Blacks in America. She knew, given the opportunity, she could become a great pilot. In her quest to

learn how to fly, Bessie turned to her friends for advice. One suggested she could become a licensed pilot in France, so Bessie learned to speak the language while saving enough money for travel. It was in France where she earned a license in June 1921, becoming the first Black of either gender, to be licensed to fly.⁴ Bessie Coleman was called “Brave Bessie” because she had fearlessly taken to the air when aviation was a greater risk than it is today, and when few men had been able to muster such courage.⁵ Earning her license inspired young Black men to ask her to give flying lessons, but she had no money for a plane or a school. The inability of the Black community to establish a flying school made Bessie more tenacious in her struggle to see Blacks fly. Unfortunately, she was killed doing the very thing she loved to do – Bessie Coleman died in 1926 in a flying accident.

Coffey & Brown

Bessie Coleman's dream did not die with her. A small group of aviation enthusiasts, led by early Black pilot William Powell, organized the Bessie Coleman Aero Club in Los Angeles to promote aviation in the Black community.⁶ Los Angeles and Chicago became important centers for Black aviation. Cornelius Coffey, an automotive engineering school graduate, worked as a mechanic and discovered there was little difference between aircraft and automobile engines. Coffee understood that one day aviation mechanics would be in demand. Later, he and a friend enrolled in the Curtiss Wright Flying Service without mentioning their race. They were accepted and paid their tuition, but the Flying Service resisted admitting them because they were not white. Supported by local businesses, Coffey and his friend were ready to file a lawsuit to allow them to continue their education. The Curtiss Wright Flying Service conceded and trained Coffey and his friend. Coffey and his friend

⁴ Charlie Cooper, *Tuskegee Heroes, Featuring the Aviation Art of Roy LaGrone* (Osceola, WI; Motorbooks International, 1996), 21.

⁵ Charlie Cooper, *Tuskegee Heroes, Featuring the Aviation Art of Roy LaGrone*, 22.

⁶ Charlie Cooper, *Tuskegee Heroes, Featuring the Aviation Art of Roy LaGrone*, 24.

graduated at the top of their class and earned certificates in the Master Mechanic Course in Airframe and Engine. Their performance convinced the school to end discrimination against Black applicants. Coffey went on to provide flight instruction at the Coffey School of Aeronautics. Coffey became part of the vanguard of Black pilots, training over 1,500 Black Airmen and was instrumental in training the Tuskegee Airmen.

Willa Brown was Coffey's better half. Born in Glasgow, Kentucky, in 1906, she received a bachelor's degree from Indiana State Teachers College and a master's degree from Northwestern University. Brown became interested in flying and earned a pilot's certificate. After receiving her pilot's certificate, Brown organized the National Airmen Association of America, the first Black aviation association. The same year she married Cornelius Coffey; together they ran the Coffey School of Aeronautics. The success of their school led the US War Department to contract with the school to conduct an experimental program to determine if Black youths could be taught to fly and become flight instructors. Brown went on to head the recruiting and training of Black combat pilots from 1940 to 1945. In addition, she became the first Black woman to serve in the US Army Air Corps Civil Air Patrol Auxiliary.

Bragg

The Coffey School of Aeronautics would never have lifted off without Janet Bragg, who purchased their school's first plane. A graduate of Spellman College and a registered nurse, she attended the Aeronautical University of Chicago where she studied Theory of Flight and other ground courses. Bragg, the Coffeys, and other aviation enthusiasts formed the Challenger Air Pilots Association, one of the first Black flying clubs in the United States. By the late 1930s, Bragg had helped over 30 Blacks to earn pilot's licenses. Additionally, Bragg developed the first college preparatory flight training program to get aspiring Black aviators ready for military pilot classes. The US government funded this program. In 1942, Bragg attended Tuskegee Institute's Civilian

Training School where she prepared and received a commercial pilot's certificate.⁷

Anderson

Alfred “Chief” Anderson is considered “The Father of Black Aviation”.⁸ Chief was raised in Virginia's rural Blue Ridge Mountains. He saved enough money to take flying lessons, but no one would give the twenty year old a chance. One day his fortunes changed, when a former German Air Force pilot from World War I was willing to give him flying lessons. By 1929, two years after his first attempt to take lessons, Chief Anderson earned his pilot certificate. In 1932, he was the first Black to receive a transport license. With \$500 he had saved and \$2,500 borrowed from family and friends, Chief purchased his own plane. In 1934, his new plane Anderson and a good friend, Doctor Albert Forsythe, became the first Blacks to fly a trans- continental flight. They also flew to Canada, the Bahamas, the West Indies, South America, and were the first to land in Nassau - which had no airport. Chief had become one of the directors of the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Howard University when the Tuskegee Institute offered him the position of lead flight instructor. He took his 3,500 flight hours and left to head the Tuskegee program, the cornerstone in training America’s first Black combat fighter pilots.

One of Chief Anderson's most effective efforts to make Tuskegee the center for Army Air Force Black pilot training was his facilitation of a visit by Eleanor Roosevelt. Roosevelt asked Anderson to fly her around the local area in one of the school’s J-3 Piper Cub aircraft. Her Secret Service escorts objected, but other officials on hand assured them that not even the President could tell her what to do:

Chief Anderson stated, “I remember her telling me that everybody told her that we Blacks couldn’t fly. Her remark was, ‘I see that you are flying all around me. Everyone that’s here is flying. You must be able to

⁷ Charlie Cooper, *Tuskegee Heroes, Featuring the Aviation Art of Roy LaGrone*, 29

⁸ Charlie Cooper, *Tuskegee Heroes, Featuring the Aviation Art of Roy LaGrone*, 39

fly. As a matter of fact, I'm going to find out right now. I'm going up with you.' That caused a lot of opposition among her escorts. They were thinking of calling the President to stop her, but she was a woman who, when she decided to do something, she was going to do it. She got in the plane with me and we had a delightful flight. She enjoyed it very much. We made a tour of the campus and the surrounding area. We came back and she said, 'Well, you can do it, all right.' Anderson credits her with a major role in causing her husband to open up the Air Corps to Blacks. How much influence she had on the decision may be debatable, but only two or three weeks later after her jaunt came authorization for an African American pursuit squadron.⁹

Photographer P.H. Polk recorded the event on film, and Roosevelt requested that he print photographs for her to take back to Washington to show the president. The next day, newspaper accounts of her flight and photographs of her standing by the plane and sitting in the cockpit behind Chief Anderson brought Tuskegee aviation to national attention.¹⁰ Chief Anderson brought to Tuskegee his ability to inspire students with passion for the air.

These were early pioneers in aviation; men and women who opened the doors for Blacks to fly. For the women, it was a bitter irony that they could fly and teach men to fly in combat, but could not fly for their country because of their race and gender. Born too soon, it was 1993 before women were given that opportunity in military service. These early pioneers devoted their lives to sharing their love of flight with as many young people as they possibly could. They met the challenge to create capable pilots while being criticized by those who jeered and said it could not be done, that Negroes could learn to fly. Their stories are evidence of their rich contributions to airpower. Yet, they were not activists and none of them had sought to make history. They realized that in their hands rested a chance to help open the blind moral eye that America had

⁹ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons* (Montgomery, Ala; USAF Collection, AFHRA), 39-40.

¹⁰ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 39-40.

turned on the question of race and prove their loyalty and courage. But in World War I there was a man who had accomplished what they had dreamed of doing; Eugene Jacques Bullard was a shining example of what the early pioneers could imagine if given an opportunity.

Chapter 1

All Blood Runs Red

BLACK EXPATRIATE

The story of the Black Airmen finds its first hero in the French Army. Eugene Jacques Bullard, a US citizen by birth, responded in 1913 to desperate appeals from the French government for all able men, French citizen and foreigner alike.¹ Quickly accepted into the French Foreign Legion, he began his storied career. For the first 18 months, Bullard and his comrades served near the Somme battlefield where 300,000 Frenchmen lost their lives. Bullard and his fellow legionnaires did most of their fighting with the bayonet, if they were not first cut down by machine gun fire. They fought with valor and took the pressure off of Paris. Bullard not only fought as a foot soldier but also as a machine gunner in heavily contested battles along the Somme at Frise, Dampierre, Harquest-en-Santerre, Notre Dame de Lorette, Artois Ridge, Mont-Saint-Eloi, and Hill 119 from 1914-1916.² He was among the survivors of hand-to-hand combat and trench warfare. With his unit completely wiped out, Bullard volunteered for the Legion's famed 1st Regiment. Bullard's new unit was based on the Alsace front. They had lost tens of thousands of Legionnaires, but he had survived the murderous fighting. After surviving the heavy losses to his unit Bullard joined the 170th Infantry Regiment; a unit so ferocious in battle, the Germans referred to them as the *swallows of death*.³ Bullard and the 170th Infantry were among the forces sent to Verdun during the epic 1916 battle. His participation in combat was inconceivably the most horrific examples of butchery and bloodshed, and moved him deeply. "I thought I had seen fighting in other battles," wrote Bullard, "but no one had

¹ Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*. (Athens, GA; University of Georgia Press, 2000), 39.

² Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*, 40.

³ Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*, 42.

ever seen anything like Verdun not ever before or ever since.”⁴ He was twice wounded by shells, the second time seriously, in the thigh. In the hospital for three months, he had earned both the Croix de Guerre and the Medaille Militarire.⁵

In Paris, on leave for his wound, he made a \$2,000 bet with an American friend that he could join the French flying corps and become a pilot. Excited about the challenge, Bullard earned his wings from the aviation school: this made Bullard the very first Black combat fighter pilot in history. In August 1917, American pilots in France were invited to join the U.S. Army Flying Corps.⁶ Bullard applied and passed the medical exam, but was denied. Bullard stated, “I was determined to do all that was in my power to make good, as I knew the eyes of the world were watching me as the first Negro military pilot in the world.”⁷ The only Black American in the French air force, Bullard flew more than 20 missions against the Germans, fought in many dogfights, and shot down at least five enemy aircraft, certifying him as an “ace.”⁸



Picture 1 “Bullard” French uniform. Please note the collar insignia that indicates his assignment to the 170th French unit. The photograph is circa 1917. Source: Photograph is courtesy of the National Museum of the Air Force

Corporal Eugene Bullard painted a red bleeding heart pierced by a knife on the fuselage of his Spad. Below the heart was the inscription "Tout le Sang qui coule est rouge!" Roughly translated it says "All Blood Runs Red."

⁴ Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the military from the Revolution to Desert Storm*. (New York; New York, Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2001), 171.

⁵ Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the military from the Revolution to Desert Storm*, 171.

⁶ Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the military from the Revolution to Desert Storm*, 172.

⁷ Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the military from the Revolution to Desert Storm*, 173.

⁸ Christopher Moore, *Black Soldiers the Unsung Heroes of World War II*. (New York: One World Ballantine Books, The Random House Publishing Group, 2005), 16.

He was born in the red clay dirt of Columbus, Georgia, in 1894. His mother died when Bullard was young, leaving his father to raise him. Bullard said his father was an educated man who worked hard as a laborer and treasured his hours at home telling his children stories about the notable deeds of their ancestors. It was his father's influence and those stories that would shape Bullard's direction in life. Bullard, divided by family loyalty, his mother's passing, and a quest for freedom, left his Columbus, Georgia home at the age of eleven. The catalyst for his early departure was the near unjust lynching of his father. This incident brought to Eugene's mind the words his father had spoken earlier to him about France, a place where a man is accepted as a man regardless of the color of his skin. He left home determined to find this place. He had acquired this determination not only from his father's teaching about the importance of dignity and self-respect but also by daring to stand up to the most feared and beloved individual in his life, the spiritually and physically imposing figure of his father.⁹

Upon arriving in France and after a short boxing career, Bullard joined his fellow American expatriates in the French Foreign Legion on 9 October 1913, his 19th birthday. After fighting in World War I, Bullard remained in France, married and divorced, and fathered two beautiful girls. In addition, he established a local jazz club where he hosted the likes of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gloria Swanson, and the England's Prince of Wales. His jazz club became one of Paris' most famous entertainment spots for singers and musicians of the time. War came again in 1939 to threaten the sovereignty of France. Bullard once again answered the call of duty. He joined the French underground and resistance movement. He spoke three languages, including German, and readily agreed to honor a request to spy for France.¹⁰ He worked with the famous French spy Cleopatra Terrier to provide information about the

⁹ Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*, 10-13.

¹⁰ Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*, 111.

Germans who had frequently visited his club before the war began.¹¹ Seeing that the war was going badly for France, Bullard offered his service to the 51st Infantry, where the senior officer assigned him to a machine gun company on the Loire River. After three days and nights of fierce battle where the infantrymen prevented German forces from advancing, an exploding artillery shell blew Bullard across a street into a wall.¹² Bullard would soon be decorated in his second war. Hampered by a serious back injury and knowing that capture meant execution, painfully he made his way to the US consulate in Bordeaux, where he received his first American passport.

Fully recovered in New York City and joined by his daughters, Bullard found work as an elevator operator in Rockefeller Center, a job he would hold until retirement. In 1954, he was among the Americans invited to France to relight the flame at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In October 1959, the sixty-five-year-old Bullard became a Knight of the Legion of Honor. His proud moment came the following year at a reception in New York, when General Charles de Gaulle, spotting Bullard in his legion uniform and his medals, pulled him out of the crowd for a handshake and an embrace. When he died in 1961, he was honored with a full French military funeral and was buried under the French tricolor in the cemetery of the Federation of French War Veterans in Flushing, New York.¹³ Forty years after the war, America finally discovered Eugene Jacques Bullard, an American-born adventurer.

Eugene Bullard's example was contrary to conventional American racial stereotypes, which held that Blacks could not succeed in jobs requiring technical skills.¹⁴ This racist view prohibited Blacks in the US Army from joining the Air Corps during World War I - even as mechanics. Eugene Bullard's contribution to airpower is significant in proving wrong the insistence

¹¹ Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*, 111.

¹² Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*, 119.

¹³ Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the military from the Revolution to Desert Storm*, 175.

¹⁴ Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris*, 151.

of influential white Americans that no Black man could ever do, and that was to fly. Flight was a potent symbol of escape from oppression, and Bullard's contribution came at a time when Blacks were denied the realization of that pointed analogy. In 1994, the US Air Force recognized Bullard's contribution to airpower and posthumously promoted him to second lieutenant. Eugene Bullard's two lives, one in America and the other in France, provide an example of the colossal waste of spiritual, social, and economic capital caused by the persistent denial to Black people of their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Chapter 2

The Black Air Force

The V for victory sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries..then let we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within. For surely those who perpetuate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces.

-- James G. Thompson

Resistance

Understanding how Blacks came to serve in the Army Air Corps and to make their remarkable contribution to airpower begins with their struggle to be accepted into the Army. During the late 1930s, there were only 6,500 Blacks in an Army of 360,000 men, constituting 1.8 percent of the total force.¹ The attitude of the Army Air Corps was that it would not accept Blacks in any capacity. The Air Corps maintained this posture until the early 1940's when political pressures forced it to modify its stand.² When the United States entered World War I in April of 1916, the United States Army had no plans to utilize the Black soldiers in the war. Additionally, the Army Air Corps prevented Blacks from joining the air service. These prejudices persisted even though Black soldiers from the Revolution War such as Crispus Attucks, Salem Poor, and Seymour Burr reminds us that American Blacks were a part of the glorious spirit of 1776. The War of 1812 proved the gallant exploits of the Black Corps D'Afrique. The Mexican War illustrated Black sailor's contribution

¹ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*. (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1986), 4.

² Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 4.

to the defense of this nation.³ After the Civil War, Congress authorized Blacks to join in four Black Army regiments: the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments and the 24th and 25th Infantry. These units were normally at full strength, and the re-enlistment rate among its men was very high. During the late 1800s these soldiers fought in the Indian Wars and were nicknamed the “Buffalo Soldier” because of their dark curly hair, which resembled a buffalo’s coat.⁴ Moreover, these brave soldiers helped protect the western frontier of the United States. They quelled tension in Nebraska, fought in the Spanish-American War and Mexican Expedition. The soldiers rescued a young Teddy Roosevelt in the Battle of San Juan Hill in Cuba and served with General John J. “Blackjack” Pershing in Spanish-American War.⁵ Because of their valor and marksmanship they continued to use the Buffalo Soldiers as Park Rangers in order to prevent and protect national parks from illegal grazing, poaching, timber thieves, and forest fires.⁶ The outstanding soldiers’ skills subsequently led to other all segregated Black units such as 317th Engineer Battalion, 92nd and 93rd Infantry Divisions who served in World War I. Later, these units would find action in World War II and with advent of the airplanes, Black soldiers volunteered to fight in the air.

By late 1930s the U.S. military increased its overall manpower, but this increase largely ignored and excluded the Black community. What is more fundamentally troubling is that the historical records reveal the capabilities of Black units and heroic individuals in previous wars. As clouds of war darkened the sky in Europe, plans for an American military buildup spurred protest and criticism from the Black press, notably the *Pittsburgh Courier*,

³ Robert E. Greene, *Black Defenders of America, 1775-1973*. (Chicago, IL; Johnson Publishing Company Inc, 1974), 1-50.

⁴ Robert E. Greene, *Black Defenders of America, 1775-1973*. (Chicago, IL; Johnson Publishing Company Inc, 1974), 43-45.

⁵ Robert E. Greene, *Black Defenders of America, 1775-1973*. (Chicago, IL; Johnson Publishing Company Inc, 1974), 43-45.

⁶ Robert E. Greene, *Black Defenders of America, 1775-1973*. (Chicago, IL; Johnson Publishing Company Inc, 1974), 45.

Labor Activists such as A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, former Federal Judge William Hastie, and other Black and white public officials, who all emphasized the desire of Black citizens to do their part in defending the nation.⁷ Senior leaders of the Army Air Corps chose not to believe that Blacks could learn to fly or perform in combat; their training, their experiences, and their prejudices prevented it. They ignored, by choice or by inclination, stories of Eugene Bullard, Bessie Coleman, Cornelius Coffey, and Willa Brown, and they had never seen a Black pilot in the Army Air Corps. They turned a blind eye to the Black press and a deaf ear to the acclaimed Anderson and Forsythe flights.

In 1939, a pair of Black aviators well-known in the Black community, Dale L. White and the outspoken Chauncey A. Spencer, used funds to rent a plane for a cross-country flight from Chicago to Washington, DC. The Black press publicized the purpose of the flight as an example of the desire and ability of Black citizens to participate in military aviation through the Civilian Pilot Training Program. The flight, made in an elderly biplane with tandem open cockpits and only airspeed and oil pressure instruments, did not go smoothly. A broken crankshaft during the first leg of the flight forced a landing on a Pennsylvania farm. The two pilots made the necessary repairs and took to the air again. Spencer described what happened when they finally arrived in the nation's capital, five days after taking off from Chicago.

In Washington they were met by National Airmen's Association lobbyist, Edgar Brown, also head of the Negro Federal Employees Union. He was called "The Goat" because he was willing to take on anything or anyone. He took Spencer and White on the underground train connecting the Capitol and Congressional offices. As they were getting off the electric car, Harry S. Truman, then a Senator from Missouri, came walking down the corridor. Brown intercepted him to introduce Spencer and White and explained their

⁷ Tuskegee Airmen LeRoy F. Gillead, *The Tuskegee Experiment and Tuskegee Airmen 1939-1949* (San Francisco, CA; 1994), 3.

mission to Washington. Truman was interested and in his customarily direct way asked many questions.

“What do you do?” he questioned. Spencer and White both explained that they were both working for the Work Projects Administration (WPA).

“So what are you doing here? Why aren’t you working today?” Spencer told him that they had taken time off because they felt they had to dramatize the need for inclusion of the Negro in the Army Air Corps.

“Why aren’t you in the Air Corps? Can’t you get in?” He seemed genuinely surprised. Edgar Brown explained to him that Negroes were not accepted.

“Have you tried?”

“No, sir, but others have tried and just been embarrassed. They’ve been turned away without regard for their training or ability. Only the color of their skin mattered.”

“Well, I think you should try.”⁸

Spencer and White stated “that they like to try but they also needed Mr. Truman to help them open the door”. Spencer stated “that haven’t been able to break down the barrier ourselves”. Mr. Truman, you don’t know what it means to be embarrassed. I’ve tried these things before. There’s just no use,” Spencer replied.⁹

“I’ve been embarrassed before.”

“Not like this, Senator Truman. Not like we are.”¹⁰

⁸ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons* (Montgomery, Ala; USAF Collection, AFHRA), 13.

⁹ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 13.

¹⁰ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 13.

Truman, now interested, said he wanted to see their plane and arranged to come to the airport that afternoon. He peppered the airmen with questions as he clambered over the plane: “How much gas can you carry? How much did it cost to rent? Do you have insurance?” He was enthusiastic, though he didn’t want a plane ride. Truman recognized the courage it took to fly the relic to Washington, and determined to support the cause of Black airmen. He did just that, helping put through legislation ensuring that Negroes would be trained along with whites under the Civilian Pilot Training Program. Spencer and White met other officials, including state Congressman Everett Dirksen who later introduced the amendment to the Civil Aeronautics bill in the House of Representatives prohibiting discrimination in administering the benefits of the act. Despite the activism, three years passed before Congress passed a bill including Negroes in the Army Air Corps.¹¹

By the end of the 1930’s however, the Black community began to devote greater attention to their lack of opportunity in the military services. The military was a source of employment for many who continued to feel the effects of the Great Depression. The pay, food, and clothing provided by the military offered them an exceptional opportunity. To be denied the right to serve was interpreted by Blacks as an example of economic discrimination. Another issue was taxation without representation, a favorite theme played up by the Pittsburgh Courier, a weekly Black newspaper. Black Americans paid taxes that supported the Armed Forces; yet, the military denied them an equal opportunity to serve. As tax-paying citizens, they were not given their due within the American system. Blacks also became skeptical over the issue of having to prove themselves by fighting for the right to serve. They believed that they had clearly demonstrated their ability in past American wars.¹² One

¹¹ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons* (Montgomery, Ala; 2006), 13.

¹² Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 9-10.

influential study of Blacks in the military service during this period was the Army War College's 1925 publication, *The Use of Negro Manpower in War*. The study concluded that Black men believed themselves inferior to white men, that they were by nature subservient, and that they lacked initiative and resourcefulness.¹³ This study, added to the War Department view that racial segregation was a product of American society, led to the pervasive belief that the military should avoid becoming entangled in the country's social problems.¹⁴ The Army War College report that casually denigrated the fighting performance of Black soldiers did more than simply reflect the prevailing social climate, however. What they deliberately left out of the report was that Black soldiers won 38 Medals of Honor between 1863 and 1898 during the Civil, Indian, and Spanish-American wars.¹⁵

In 1939, Congress passed a public law to establish the Civilian Pilot Training Act. The purpose was to create a reserve of civilian pilots to be called in the event of war. This act was a direct result of constant pressures from the Black community and from organizations which rejected the accepted racist practices of excluding Blacks from the Army Air Corps. Even after this progressive act became law, the door remained shut for Black pilots. Congress added breadth to this act by implementing Public Law 18, which created Black civilian pilot training schools sponsored by the Army Air Corps.¹⁶ By the fall of 1939, Blacks could enter the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) at each of the following six Black colleges: Delaware State College, Dover, Delaware; Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia; Howard University, Washington, D.C.; North Carolina A&T College, Greensboro, North Carolina; Tuskegee Institute,

¹³ Alan Gropman L. *The Air Force Integrates 1945-1964*. (Washington, D.C. Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1985). 2.

¹⁴ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 6.

¹⁵ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 3.

¹⁶ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 21.

Tuskegee, Alabama; and West Virginia State College, Institute, West Virginia. The first Blacks graduated from several of these Civilian Pilot Training Programs at these institution. There were several other non-college programs across the nation that trained Blacks in aviation under the Civilian Pilot Training Program. The programs had a total of 91% graduate rate, and achieved a record on par with other Whites within its first year.¹⁷

Despite these successes, the Air Corps remained reluctant to accept or employ these Black pilot graduates. Air Corps Chief, General Henry “Hap” Arnold defended his service’s position and reflected that there was no way to utilize them and there was no reason to train Blacks to fly. The Operations Division of the War Department also wrote a one-page negative report that the effectiveness of the Air Corps would be hindered by having Blacks work side by side with whites. There was fear that racial proximity might destroy morale, since a very close association between pilots and mechanics was necessary.¹⁸ Further, the report made negative comments about the service of Black officers in World War I, concluding that they would not make good officers in the Air Corps. Finally, the report noted that there were *no Blacks pilots in the armed services of any of the world powers*, ignoring Eugene Bullard’s record. Had Bullard been considered, perhaps the Army Air Corps would not have been so reluctant to admit Blacks. Pervasive racist attitudes and constant resistance from the Air Corps yielded to the continuous public pressure out an Army officials and Congress to accept Blacks in 1940. This in turn, resulted in the application of ensuring fair distribution of Blacks among the Armed Services. The 1940 Amended Selective Training and Service Act disallowed discrimination based on race and color and thereby provided an opportunity for Blacks to volunteer and serve in civilian and military ground, technical, and flying training facilities. This also enabled the creation of non-flying aviation squadrons where the sole purpose of having Blacks in the white Air Corps was

¹⁷ Alan Gropman L. *The Air Force Integrates 1945-1964*, 5.

¹⁸ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 23.

to act as servants. These actions only intensified the injustice that were an affront to the dignity of Blacks and further eroded the civil rights of Black soldiers.

In the fall of 1940, the Black community and the War Department confronted each other, bringing about significant results. Black leaders wrote a letter to the President requesting that Blacks should be able to work in all branches of the aviation corps. Black leaders wanted the opportunity to be trained as navigators, bombers, gunners, radiomen, and mechanics, and not just as pilots, in order to have full participation in the air service. The War Department published a policy regarding Black utilization in the air service that would allow for Blacks to have a fair and equitable share within the branches of the aviation corps. The policy also reiterated that Blacks and whites were not to intermingle through organization or training. As result of more intensified pressure and the expressed disappointment of the Black community, the War Department announced the formation of an all-Black Pursuit Squadron and the training of Black pilots at Tuskegee. However, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) disliked the idea of segregated training, although it was step in the right direction, and noted that we “can be forced to accept it, but we can never agree to it.”¹⁹ The NAACP further condemned the establishment of the all-Black squadron, stating “that they would rather be excluded than segregated.”²⁰ The relationship between the Black community and the government was contentious, but despite the frustration with segregated, Blacks found success in the Army Air Corps and at Tuskegee. While the Black community and leaders were sharply opposed to

Picture 2 “War Bonds”
Source: USAF Collection,



¹⁹ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 17.

²⁰ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 17.

segregation, they understood that Tuskegee was an opportunity to fly and serve in the Army Air Corps. The pressure continued from the Black community, and there were many articles written about the Black soldier's plight to be accepted for military service. One article in particular wrote on *Now is the Time Not to Be Silent*. It referred to Blacks being loyal and patriotic and stated that Black Americans would devote their fullest support to the war effort, but the fight against Hitlerism began in Washington first. Thus, the people of America had to gird and sacrifice "for freedom for everyone, everywhere, not merely for those under the Hitler heel and that a Jim Crow army cannot fight for a free world."²¹ These Black pilots were to be trained under the supervision of 11 white officers and 15 white noncommissioned officers. The 99th Pursuit Squadron became the drum major of this new commitment of allowing Blacks to serve in Army Air Corps.

Why Tuskegee

By 1941, the War Department had created a segregated Air Corps for Blacks. The 99th Pursuit Squadron was created for technical training, the Primary Flying Training at Moton Field, Tuskegee for pre-military pilot training, and the Flying School at Tuskegee Army Air Field for military pre-flight, basic, and advance pilot training. Blacks could now contribute fully across the Army's services with the construction of a segregated pilot training track and a flying aviation squadron. Despite many obstacles, Tuskegee became the focal point of training airmen to fly in the Army Air Corps. Initially, two sites were considered; Chicago and Tuskegee. Chicago lost out due to expensive real estate, crowded air space, and weather condition frequently unsuitable for pilot training. Tuskegee earned primacy because other colleges trained in Piper Cub airplanes, while Tuskegee used more powerful Waco airplanes in conducting advance flying courses. In addition, students could earn certificates as flight instructors, qualify in cross country flying, and instrument flying, and serve as civilian commercial flight officers. The other colleges sent their graduates to

²¹ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 19.

Tuskegee for advanced training as pursuit pilots. Moreover, Mrs. Roosevelt's highly-publicized visit and flight were invaluable for the Tuskegee aviation program. Papers across the nation ran the story just as the Army was about to choose its training site. The news supported the idea of military flight training for Black pilots and it gave a boost to locating that training at the small Alabama school. Photographs of Chief Anderson in the cockpit with Eleanor Roosevelt provided an indisputable visual answer to the notion that Blacks were incapable of such a complex technical task as flying a plane. Mrs. Roosevelt further contributed to Tuskegee by securing the Rosenthal grant to allow construction of a larger airfield near the school. However, the Roosevelt factor was only one of many factors in selecting a site for Army's primary training field. Political and practical matters beyond the scope of this paper also influenced the decision:

- The President's New Deal efforts to relieve the grinding poverty of the segregated rural South
- Racial restrictions on adequate housing for Blacks at other locations
- Veteran Administration hospitals and the Infantile Paralysis Hospital for Black patients already located at Tuskegee
- Tuskegee averaged more days per year of good flying weather than Chicago ²²

The Army made its choice: Tuskegee would expand its aviation curriculum to become the sole flight training base for Black pilots. The Tuskegee Institute became a successful program throughout the war, a program that grew to include all phases of pilot training from preflight to combat readiness.

²² David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons* (Montgomery, Ala; 2006), 41.

The choice of Tuskegee did not meet with immediate approval from the Black public and its press. In fact, Chicago offered training in an area that did not have legal segregation, which enhanced the possibility of later integrated military training facilities. The placement of segregated squadron near Tuskegee was a divisive issue among the Black community. Black organizations and leaders opposed the Army's separate but equal policy and had worked for a fully integrated military. One prominent Black leader wrote "there is not now and never has been any good reason for the segregated training of Negro flyers."²³ While many Blacks were un-happy with such a policy, a few, such as Tuskegee President Doctor F. D. Patterson believed that full acceptance and integration could only come about slowly.²⁴ Historian Robert Jakeman points out Dr. Patterson's vision beyond the segregated policy:

Patterson's policy of "segregated opportunity" was in the tradition of Booker T. Washington and it had indeed led to new opportunities in the Air Corps...In short, the racial climate of the period precluded any tidy solution that would have shielded the dreams of patriotic young men...from the realities of racial prejudice.²⁵

Locating the training base in Alabama meant imposing off-post segregation upon all who were to be assigned there. The village of Tuskegee was located in the pine hills of eastern Alabama's Macon County. The 1930 census reported the county's population as 27, 103, with 75% of its citizens working in agriculture and 80% being African-American. The 1940 census showed the population of Tuskegee as 3,937 citizens, of whom two-thirds were Black. The little town had few accommodations for either Blacks or whites; one segregated movie house and a few small restaurants, only one of which was for Blacks. White merchants in town were ambivalent about the influx of Black

²³ Randy Johnson, *From Cubs to Hawks: The Story of the Aircraft, Airfields, and Training of the Tuskegee Airmen* (Eastern National, 2005), 31.

²⁴ Randy Johnson, *From Cubs to Hawks: The Story of the Aircraft, Airfields, and Training of the Tuskegee Airmen*, 31.

²⁵ Randy Johnson, *From Cubs to Hawks: The Story of the Aircraft, Airfields, and Training of the Tuskegee Airmen*, 31.

officers, many of whom were from northern states, Black cadets quipped that whites would rather have liked to send their money to town while the Black cadets stayed on the campus. Such factors would have several medical implications to the cadet's morale, and essentially affect the flying efficiency. It was important in a very tough and demanding flight training that cadets were able to release pressures of the training through on and off campus recreational facilities.

The Army Air Corps initially decided on the pursuit flying mission for Blacks and this decision centered around the additional strain on segregated facilities of having to train to become bomber crews – pilots, navigators, gunners, and bombardiers. Shortly after it became the focal point, Tuskegee added the Tuskegee Army Air Field which evolved as the only Black center for civilian and military pilot training. Tuskegee would become fully equivalent, with respect to the character of living conditions, facilities equipment, and training, to that provided for white personnel under similar conditions.²⁶ The traditional racial ideas of white America were difficult to change over time, but the pervasiveness of Blacks to challenge the majority of the American public would soften the harden stance. Blacks expressed in different ways that the ideas of the founding fathers of this nation could be achieved and that they would not simply accept the status quo, as they were willing to fight for their right to fully participate in military service. The Black community continued to organize and meet the racist challenges to fight for their right to participate and when that was achieved, they continued to fight for fair treatment.

The Tuskegee Army Aviation Detachment was born out of both the determination of Blacks and the resistance whites. The enthusiasm and increasing number of Blacks who wanted to be pilots required a larger airfield to augment the already short runway at Kennedy Field. The leaders at Maxwell and Tuskegee negotiated a contract to purchase 650 acres of pine woods and

²⁶ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 24.

farmland three miles northeast of the town of Tuskegee, which became the new home for the new Army Air Corps Advanced Flying Training Detachment (AFTD) at Moton Field, named for a former president of the Institute. In addition to Moton Field, the Army authorized construction of a standard flight training facility several miles to the north: a complete army post and airfield with three runways. Late in 1941 work began on the site that would become Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF), known after the war as Sharpe Field.²⁷ It provided advanced training for graduates of nearby Moton Field. This detachment was attached to the Air Corps Training Center at Maxwell Field, and under the directive that all new Black pilots were to be trained under the supervision of white officers and noncommissioned officers until such time that a sufficient number of Black airmen could be trained to replace them.²⁸

The AFTD fell under the command of Captain Noel F. Parrish, a white man, the first commander of the Advance Flying Training Detachment. Parrish's prior experience as commander of military students was with the first Civil Contract Primary School of Aeronautics in Glenview, Illinois and with flight training at Maxwell Field led to his transfer from that base to duty at Tuskegee. Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., transferred from the 9th Cavalry Regiment at Fort Riley, Kansas to the Air Corps at Tuskegee, as a commissioned officer, not a cadet, and would become the Commandant of Cadets at the AFTD. Second Lieutenant H. C. Magoon, a white Air Corps officer, transferred from the Advanced Flying Training School at Maxwell Field to Tuskegee in August 1941. Davis, Johnson, Parrish and Magoon, three captains and a lieutenant, two Black and two white, formed the entire officer cadre of the Tuskegee Army Air Field Training Detachment. The Army Air Forces (AAF) plan provided for the training of only 45 Black officers during the first year of operation but more Blacks applied to be pilots and pushed for a

²⁷ History of Air Force: History of 66th AAF Flying Training Detachment: Moton Field: Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, February 1941 – December 1941, IRIS No. 00151182, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

²⁸ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 24.

greater increase of slots. Army Air Forces staff and students began to arrive at Tuskegee Institute in July 1941 to augment the small cadre already in place. Major Ellison, the former Project Officer at Maxwell, assumed overall command at Tuskegee from Captain Parrish on 23 July; Parrish remained as commander of the civilian flying training detachment. By 1941, the Army Air Forces instruction began at once, supplementing the training already being given at the Institute through the school's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and Civilian Pilot Training Programs (CPTP). Students at the Institute could volunteer for the ROTC, or could apply to be cadets under the CPTP. Upon graduation from college, ROTC graduates received a commission as a second lieutenant. If accepted for flying training, these men retained their military rank and privileges. CPTP graduates could enter military flying training as aviation cadets. Cadets served during training in the same status and for about the same pay as cadets at West Point or Annapolis, plus earning flight pay equal to half their base pay. A cadet successfully completing flying training would receive silver pilot wings and gold second lieutenant bars at his graduation ceremony—a proud moment indeed.

During the military buildup leading to World War II, leaders of the Army Air Forces hesitated to utilize Blacks even though they had established Black Air Force units. It was recommended by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force to a limit the use of Blacks to various bases and that they would be assigned to facilities at aviation squadrons. The AAF even limited how many pilots would be trained. Tuskegee Harold Sawyer stated "We started out with fifty, the largest class to start into training," he said, "but only nineteen of us graduated. They had a quota system. They were NOT going to let but so many graduate. Period. It was frustrating, because some of the guys went clear up to the night before graduation and then washed out. You were on a tightrope! As you went onto flight line for your hour, you never knew whether you were going to be coming back the next day or not. I never heard of anybody getting washed out of ground school, but they whacked you on that flying. We know there were

just as many good pilots that washed out as made it through.”²⁹ The AAF wanted a very small percentage of Blacks in its force and felt justified not using Blacks because the AAF had not tested Black pilots in combat. Finally, General Arnold suggested “that the commanding officers of each station use Blacks in the maintenance and care of AAF equipment as well as Air Base grounds.”³⁰ In an attempt to absorb this tremendous influx of Black recruits, the AAF organized the majority of Blacks into units and assigned them jobs which did not require pilot training or high skill levels. These units became labor battalions equivalent to ones used in World War I. The AAF argued that this type of unit would be the most advantageous in utilizing a pool of unskilled men, and the jobs, although routine and perhaps menial, were essential for a modern military fighting machine to operate efficiently. The AAF plan called for 700 service troops at each base to be assigned to a Truck Company, a Medical Detachment, a Quartermaster Detachment, and a Weather Station Units. This brought into being the 96th Service Group as one of the least known organizations that supported the famed Tuskegee Airmen overseas.

²⁹ Charlie and Ann Cooper, *Tuskegee’s Heroes* (Osceola, WI Motorbooks International Publishers & Wholesalers, 1996) 61.

³⁰ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 27.

Chapter 3

2164th Army Air Force Base Unit

We were fighting two battles. I flew for my parents, for my race, for our battle for first-class citizenship and for my country. We were fighting for the millions of Black Americans back home. We were there to break down barriers, open a few doors, and do a job.

-- Tuskegee Airmen Joseph Philip Gomer

The history of Black service support units begins with the men and women who operated the 2164th Army Air Forces (AAF) Base Unit, and who supported the men trained to fly and fight over the skies of Europe and Italy against Axis forces. As mentioned in chapter two, there were several reasons why Tuskegee earned the distinction of training the Negro Cadets. But the Vaughn property northeast of Tuskegee that was selected for the new training site had serious drawbacks. The property owner was willing to cooperate with Tuskegee, agreeing to a selling price of \$50 per acre for 650 acres.¹ Even in the Jim Crow era the airfield contractors did not call on the white citizens of Tuskegee to help establish the all Negro Primary Flying School, white citizens were willing to help locate areas for development.² To complete the air strip and facilities took hundreds of maintainers, medical personnel, ground safety personnel, administrators, and other support troops that kept the new flying detachment running. Many components of the 2164th were required to keep the new flying detachment running. The first component was the 320th College Training

Picture 3 "Construction" Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



¹ History of Air Force: History of 66th AAF Flying Training Detachment: Moton Field: Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, February 1941 – December 1941, IRIS No. 00151182, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

² History of Air Force: History of 66th AAF Flying Training Detachment: Moton Field: Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, February 1941 – December 1941, IRIS No. 00151182, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

Detachment (CTD). At the beginning of the military build-up, Army cadets had to have two years of college education, but as the need for more pilots became critical, the Army Air Forces established the College Training Detachment for those cadets with no college background. Cadets bound for Tuskegee started in the CTD and received five months of college classes in math, science, and the humanities, plus ten hours of flight time at Kennedy Field in Union Springs, Alabama in one of the institute's airplanes. The purpose of the training was to improve the cadet's chance of successfully completing Army flight training. However, because of the growing demands on the flight line, the seventeen-week course was accelerated to eleven weeks. Because of the acceleration the 2164th was managed in several components, this chapter highlights a few components to show the complexity of operating a new base in support of a new pilot training program.

Maintenance

The maintenance function of the 2164th was organized along the crew chief type. Teams of ten mechanics and technicians split into three groups of three with a flight chief in charge. The crews kept training operations on track by maintaining and repairing the planes supervised by the flight chief. All maintenance personnel and crew chiefs fell under the direct supervision of the Chief of Maintenance and his assistant. The maintenance personnel consisted of two airplane and engine mechanics, two first class civilian air mechanics, fourteen unrated mechanics, and numerous helpers and apprentices.³ Each of Moton Field's three crews, headed by a crew chief, was responsible for an assigned flight of planes. The crew inspected their aircraft every morning before training began. They monitored the flight hours of each plane and conducted maintenance checks after 25, 50, 75, and 100 hours of flight time, making repairs when needed. The maintenance crews were not without problems to solve.

³ History of Air Force: History of 2164th AAF Base Unit: Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, February 1944 – December 1944, IRIS No. 00151182, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

For example, the Fairchild PT-19 served briefly as a trainer at Moton Field. It was an excellent plane, but it had serious shortcomings as a trainer because its plywood center section could crack if a cadet bounced the plane too hard on landing, and sometimes would crack even during a routine landing. The maintenance crews then had to change the center section, which involved pulling off both wings. Also, the terrain around the field required a faster rate of climb than the PT-19 could easily deliver. As the PT-19 had too much down time and raised safety concerns, the PT-17 returned as the primary trainer. The Stearman PT-17 was powered by a Continental R-670 engine. This was a single-engine plane, so the power plant had to be dependable. During each 100-hour inspection the crew changed the spark plugs and oil and gave the engine a thorough inspection. After 750 flight hours they conducted a major overhaul. For this job they sent it to depot, the highest level of maintenance where the most technical tasks took place. Occasionally, the entire engine had to be replaced.⁴

Wing Maintenance

Mechanics carefully examined the all-important wings as part of routine aircraft inspections. If a wing had severe damage they would replace it. As with all parts, the Army requisitioned the new wing through the military supply system and civilian mechanics installed it. For example, the PT-17's biplane-wings and fuselage were covered with a special linen fabric. If wing damage could be repaired, the mechanics stretched new fabric over the wing. Then, in a temperature controlled room, they applied a clear solution called dope, painting several layers over the fabric for strength, rigidity, and waterproofing.

Training the Maintenance Personnel

All the mechanics at Moton Field and their apprentices and helpers were civilians, and most graduated from the Tuskegee Institute. They attended a three-month mechanics course, and then entered an apprentice program under

⁴ History of Air Force: History of 2164th AAF Base Unit: Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, February 1944 – December 1944, IRIS No. 00151182, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

the supervision of the Chief of Maintenance. From the early days of the aviation program, two other aircraft and engine-rated mechanics were instrumental in training mechanics in the maintenance of planes.

Women in Maintenance

In 1942, due to the wartime manpower shortage, the Army Air Force began accepting women as apprentice mechanics. Moton Field's managers had made no provision for female mechanics when they planned its facilities, but accustomed by now to constant change, they made adjustments. Women soon made up a large proportion of the mechanics and support personnel, driving gas trucks, fueling aircraft, washing aircraft, and working on engines.

But when we'd do a 100-hour check...We'd have to take the big front wheels off, jack'em up. And we could, the girls- would do that.-Fanni Gunn Boyd, Mechanic

- National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior

Supply

The supply function operated out of a satellite installation of Tuskegee Army Air Field. The 2164th had no direct authority over the satellite, but had a supply officer who was accountable for all supplies. The 2164th received its supplies from the 309th Sub-Depot.⁵ The Army Air Corps provided the school at Moton Field with what it needed for its mission: everything from the training aircraft and parts and supplies for aircraft maintenance to textbooks and teaching materials. Personnel in the supply room requisitioned and controlled aircraft parts through this supply system.

Records

Performing good maintenance was impossible without keeping good records, and personnel of the maintenance records room made that happen. The room was staffed by Army enlisted men and personnel of the flying school contracting with the Army. On a board they tracked the maintenance status of

⁵ History of Air Force: History of 2164th AAF Base Unit: Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, February 1944 – December 1944, IRIS No. 00151182, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

each aircraft assigned to Moton Field. The contractor personnel kept files on maintenance and on technical orders for aircraft alternations. Detailed and accurate maintenance records were essential to efficient operation of the airplanes at Moton Field. Civilian women worked with enlisted men to manage the records room. There were two divisions of records; one tracked airplane maintenance records, and one maintained records of cadet flying. Accurate paperwork ensured both flight safety and correct government billing. Both enlisted men and contractor personnel maintained a wall chart showing the status of maintenance checks performed and due on each airplane assigned, keeping current the files on aircraft maintenance and the various technical orders for contractor-performed aircraft modifications.

Parachute Maintenance

As Moton Field rapidly took shape, spaces for some functions like parachute maintenance had to be jury-rigged until the field was complete. The periodic unfolding and drying out of parachutes by a powerful electric draft fan required a special tower. Moton Field workers worked around their lack of a tower and constructed in Hangar I a space for riggers to hang parachutes from the hangar's trusses without interrupting ongoing aircraft maintenance.

Morale

Until the Skyway Club opened, the Tea Room at Moton Field was an oasis for instructors and military personnel. Occasionally a celebrity like Lena Horne would visit there when performing in a USO show nearby Tuskegee Army Air Field for Cadets.

The old adage says that amateurs talk tactics and while professionals talk logistics, are the heart service supply units who supported the famed Tuskegee Airmen. The road to victory not only supported the pilot's preparation to become fighter pilots for the war, but they took the same determination and ingenuity overseas and supported the famed pilots in

enormous logistics operation. The 96th Air Service Group is one of those incredible units that did a remarkable job.

Chapter 4

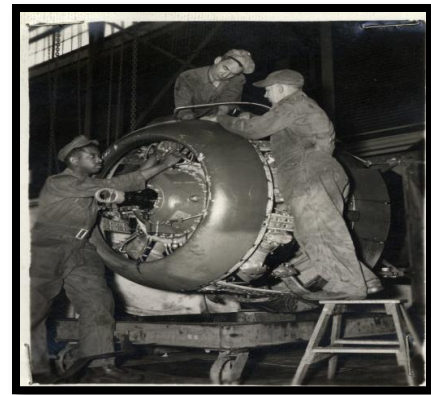
The 96th Air Service Group

When unit commanders realize that a motor vehicle is a fighting weapon, the greater part of the transport problems will be solved.

-- Army Study

This is the narrative of the service support personnel who after supporting the historical train-up brought the same zeal and purpose to see their Black Airmen fly. Logistics warfare is where America excelled beyond all other armies during World War II.¹ The American Army's ability to move rapidly vast quantities of materiel and hundreds of thousands of men over great distances was remarkable. Nevertheless, the contribution of service support personnel was extensive, the sheer quantity and quality of work performed on round-the-clock schedules was tremendous and cannot be lightly dismissed in contrast to the combat pilots.

Picture 4 "Mechanics" Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



It is easy to praise and glorify the courageous men who climbed into cockpits and faced the enemy at high speeds and higher altitudes, but it was the men of the 96th Air Service Group that were the soul of their success. The history of 96th Air Service Group is unique and remarkable. The 96th was comprised of thousands of men performing support functions. The group was deployed to Foggia and later to Jesi, Italy, in 1944. The Allied strategy in Italy was to keep the enemy forces fully occupied in this region so it would be impossible to withdraw any Axis troops from Italy to help defend the coast of France. The capture of Rome also held special significance for the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces and, more specifically, for the Twelfth and Fifteenth Army Air Forces. It marked the culmination of the largest Tactical Air Force campaign to date and

¹ David P. Colley, *The Road to Victory: The Untold Story of World War II's Red Ball Express* (Dulles, Virginia; Brassey Publication, 2000), 206.

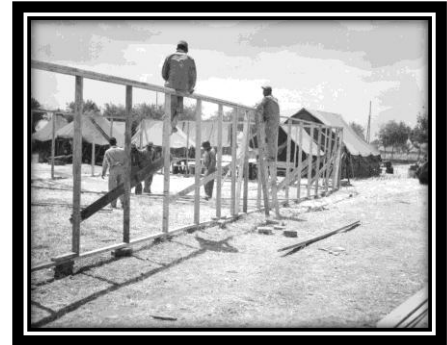
the emergence of strategic bombing as an important Air Force strategy in the Mediterranean theater.² One of the main objectives of the Italian campaign was to capture the Foggia plains. Army Air Force planners had long recognized the fact that Southern Italy could host bomber bases within striking distance of the Balkans and the German industrial plants moved beyond the range of bombers based in Britain.³ Jesi, well within the area of operations, was an agricultural and commercial center in the flood plain on the north bank of the Esino River. The 96th Service Group established Jesi as a nirvana for allied troops with its daily news bulletin, large operational maps, and variety of magazines, papers, clippings, great meals, Post Exchange (PX), and reading room. The group labored around the clock to keep pots boiling, airplanes repaired, and supplies moving while frequently under attack from German airplanes. The 96th had two Italian language instructors to provide the unit and other transient troops with nightly language classes. The residents of Jesi were friendly to allied forces; there were no acts of sabotage, and the morale of the Airmen was high despite limited recreational and social facilities. The military courtesy, dress, and deportment of members of this command won favorable comments from many Jesi businessmen. A significant and unique feature of the 96th was that they were not assigned to any specific fighter or bomber group, but were to service all types of planes making forced or emergency landings within a one hundred mile radius and take care of transient crews awaiting transportation. Thousands of support men serving as maintenance, communications technicians, radio operators, mechanics, armorers, medics, cooks, and logisticians were necessary for support.

² 1LT Charles E. Francis, *Tuskegee Airmen; The Men Who Changed A Nation* (Boston, MA; Branden Brooks publishing Co., Inc 2008), 108.

³ 1LT Charles E. Francis, *Tuskegee Airmen; The Men Who Changed A Nation*, 108.

The support men on the ground received little credit, but without them the fighter pilots could not have been successful. The support personnel were the lifeline of the fighter pilots. The Headquarter Squadron which formed first in Foggia moved to Jesi to establish a headquarters and administer the affairs of the units assigned to its command. The units assigned to the 96th Air Service Group were the 367th Air Service

Picture 5 "Build" Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



Squadron, 1051st Quartermaster Company Service Group Aviation (Avn), 1766th Ordnance Supply & Maintenance Company (Avn), 1901st Quartermaster Truck Company (Avn) and Detachment, 1000th Signal Company Service Group (Avn). The next section provides a glimpse of the unheralded history of the 96th Air Service Squadron's contribution to airpower. The men of these units were the unsung heroes who did not receive the notoriety their fellow Tuskegee Airmen they were supporting. They neither asked for nor sought attention; rather, they sought the opportunity to fight the enemy of their country and in doing so bring down the walls of injustice and discrimination in the country they served and loved. They were critical components of the tidal wave of arms, men, and machines that overwhelmed the Axis forces. They were committed to excellence and to keep the planes flying.

367th Air Service Squadron

A tremendous amount of work fell to the 367th, who were both eager and willing to do the work and cognizant of the responsibility that rested upon them. Their job was to service, repair, and salvage aircraft that landed on their field and the seven other nearby air fields. They understood the grave necessity of returning all repairable aircraft to combat. Their challenge and success was evidenced by the statistical records of work performed by men whose experience was limited only to fighter planes. By October 1944, because of their resourcefulness, experience, and abilities, they were able to reduce the

maintenance time of airplanes in the war over Italy. The work of the 367th Air Service Squadron increased to such a degree that the Group Commander found it necessary to request assistance for more Airmen to help clear up the backlog of repairs and salvage. With the additional Airmen, a considerable number of planes returned to service. Despite the number of planes landing daily, these amazing men kept an incredible number of planes operational. These men worked day and night in their efforts to support the Tuskegee Airmen and others. They met the challenge of their battle cry, “more planes needed for combat!”⁴

During their deployment the 367th continued to improve, feeding and housing transients from downed aircraft, aviators rescued at sea, and former prisoners of war. If the men of 367th did not have the necessary parts, they would jump into their jeeps or trucks and travel to supply depots or other established bases to acquire them. They would beg, borrow, barter, and sometimes go into other groups’ wrecked plane lots at night and salvage parts with a flashlight. ⁵ The men took pride in their work and were committed to excellence. Often engines in their planes had to be changed or overhauled, or planes returned from a mission so badly damaged they looked like they were ready for the junk yard, but they were rapidly returned to service. In all, the 367th Air Service Squadron record was impeccable. Figure 1 displays their statistical record within one year of their service in Italy.

⁴ History of Air Force 96th Air Service Group History, October 1944 – February 1945, IRIS No. 00101315,00101316,00101319,00101320, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

⁵ 1LT Charles E. Francis, *Tuskegee Airmen; The Men Who Changed A Nation* (Boston, MA; Branden Brooks publishing Co., Inc 2008), 314.

Table 1: Results of repairs services in Italy.

367th Air Service Squadron	Falconara and Jesi Italy
Planes Serviced	482
Engine Changes	134
Minor Repairs	184
Salvage Jobs	32
Personnel Fed	1,727
Personnel Housed	1010
Aviation Gas	8,888,356 gal
Oil	16,011 gal

Source: HISTORY OF AIR FORCE 96TH AIR SERVICE GROUP HISTORY, OCTOBER 1944 – FEBRUARY 1945, IRIS NO. 00101315,00101316,00101319,00101320, IN THE USAF COLLECTION, AFHRA.

1051st Quartermaster Company Service Group Aviation

The work of the 1051st was outstanding in securing and distributing supplies to small units scattered across southern and northern Italy. The unit was not only known for their great service to combat troops, but more so for their provision of daily fresh meat that won the hearts of the average fighting man who grew to hate the standard canned rations. The 1051st was also in charge of the mini-PX store. All supplies were categorized in a classification system, and supply depots often had specialized functions relating to the class of supplies they received. Class I supplies were principally rations, and were consumed at a uniform rate. Class II included clothing and weapons. Class III consisted of gasoline, lubricants, and construction materiel. Class V included ammunition, explosives, and chemical agents. Class I supplies serviced approximately 1,900 troops, 500 more than were serviced by Classes II and IV. The PX serviced 1,800 troops within area of operation. Gasoline was the most critical commodity for the war effort after the breakout from the Sicily and the Normandy beaches. Plane guzzled gas at an enormous rate. The P-51C had to use drop tanks to ensure they could meet and protect the bombers on their

mission deep into Axis territory. Two 75-gallons tanks would enable a P-51C to fly 6 hours and depending on their weight they could fly as long as 8-hours.

Table 2: Results of Class service support in one-year service in Italy.

1051st Quartermaster CO Ser Grp (AVN)	Jesi Italy
Class I	457 tons
Class II & IV	30,749 tons
Class III	187,936 gallons
Oil & Diesel Oil	29,035 gallons
Kerosene	2,845 gallons
Grease	830 lbs
Coal	20,738 lbs

Source: History of Air Force 96th Air Service Group History, October 1944 – February 1945, IRIS No. 00101315,00101316,00101319,00101320, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

1901st Quartermaster Truck Company Aviation

The only method of supply for the Americans in combat areas was to transport materiel by truck. The senior officers in Italy quickly learned that trucks and drivers were often exposed to enemy fire, and in this new, highly mobile warfare that developed in Italy, often found themselves in combat. Therefore trucks and drivers played a pivotal role in the war. The 1901st debut to mechanized warfare that characterized the fighting in World War II came during the Allies' chaotic efforts to haul supplies to the front to maintain vehicles. The 1901st was called upon to performed difficult tasks under extreme conditions exacerbated by the state of their vehicles, due to long hauls, bad roads, enemy contact, and the short turnarounds dictated by a limited numbers. The goal of the 1901st was to keep operational trucks running and to repair or salvage other trucks. The 1901st was successful in its efforts to keep supplies moving for Airmen in the area. Compared to European theater sister units, the 1901st did an awe-inspiring job in maintaining vehicles and performing under wicked conditions.

The drivers in Europe also faced fatigue at alarming rate which contributed to poor maintenance. Truckers were at the wheel for such long periods that they had neither the time nor the energy to carry out even basic preventive maintenance work. Round-trips often required forty-eight to sixty-five hours of constant running, and drivers became so exhausted that they sometimes sabotaged their vehicles for a few hours of rest.⁶ The Army noted that although maintenance was poor among Allied units in Europe, the lack of proper vehicle care was not isolated to Europe or even to military operations in World War II. Pre-war studies noted the lack of preventive care that American troops gave to their vehicles. One report stated:

Picture 6 "Engine Work" Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



In the fall of 1941, a spot check of about one-third of the motor vehicles of five divisions, made by a group of mechanics under the control of the Inspector General, showed that forty-seven percent of the vehicles were improperly lubricated, fifty percent had distributors loose or dirty and points badly burned, forty-nine

percent had loose steering gear housings, fifty-three percent had under inflated tires, twenty-three percent had improper wheel alignment, thirty-six percent had dry batteries and thirty-seven percent had tires that were badly worn, cupped, and improperly mounted. There was no reason to believe that this discovery did not represent average conditions throughout the Army; and it was plain that the conditions were mainly the fault of careless drivers.⁷

⁶ David P. Colley, *The Road to Victory: The Untold Story of World War II's Red Ball Express* (Dulles, Virginia; Brassey Publication, 2000), 158.

⁷ David P. Colley, *The Road to Victory: The Untold Story of World War II's Red Ball Express*, 161.

In general, truck maintenance was poor in the European theater, with over fifty percent of the trucks on deadline. Europe and Italy were different theaters, but their logistical similarities make comparisons valid. The Airmen in Italy were determined logisticians who kept planes flying, as evidenced by their success. Their dedication does not detract from the commitment and this is not to say that the logicians in Europe were not determined to ensure success of combat soldiers but they were equally committed to goals of the war.

The 1901st often ignored the weight restrictions on many of their trucks, in order to meet mission requirements. For example, most trucks were dispatched overloaded, often dangerously so. Airmen would drive in the middle of road to maintain better control through

Italy's rugged mountainous landscape, because the shoulders often dropped precipitously into gullies. Sleep was a precious commodity among the truck company, because they worked around the clock seven days a week to maintain vehicles and get the required supplies to the Airmen. They drove without assistant

drivers and drove without lights for the last ten miles when coming to enemy lines. Severe weather conditions also played a major obstacle, but the 1901st still kept supply routes open and trucks operational. One example of the ingenuity and determination of these support Airmen happened when the 1901st suffered a three day snow storm and had to ground all but absolute mission essential vehicles. Two of the 1901st Airmen faced this massive snow storm while traveling back from picking up mission essential supplies for the 96th; they had to make frequent stops just to keep the snow off the windshield. The drivers had to stop 500 yards before making it to their home base, so they took off on foot to get help from fellow Airmen to make the road passable for vital supplies. Despite this storm, they only lost five brooms; they were stolen

Picture 7 "Snow Work" Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



when they left the vehicle to get assistance.⁸ This is one of countless examples of these committed Airmen who supported airpower. The 2 ½-ton truck was the most valuable weapon of the 1901st. It carried valuable engines, planes, gasoline, rations, ammunition, fighting men, prisoners, and wounded and dead Americans. It carried anything, anywhere, anytime, and was critical to the 1901st success to airmen.

1766th Ordnance Supply and Maintenance Company Aviation

Upon arriving in theater, the 1766th Ordnance Supply and Maintenance Company (Aviation) immediately set up shop in requisitioned buildings.

Limited by long supply lines and the slow arrival of spare parts into theater, the 1766th did a herculean job reducing the status of deadlined vehicles despite unavailability of spare parts. The parts had to come by plane, but there was an enormous backlog for parts which increased delays in fixing vehicles. The unit was resilient in using what parts and materials they had on hand to

Picture 8 "Fuel Up" Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



ensure mission success. The unit went from 12.61% deadlined of vehicles to 2.61% all within a one month span by working long hours and making do with scrap material.⁹ To put this in tangible terms, the 1766th serviced 688 trucks, completed 655 repairs, changed 41 engines, and salvaged three war-weary vehicles in one month.¹⁰ This astounding feat exemplifies others which were instrumental to their success and the overall success of Allied forces.¹¹

⁸ History of Air Force 96th Air Service Group History, October 1944 – February 1945, IRIS No. 00101315,00101316,00101319,00101320, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

⁹ History of Air Force 96th Air Service Group History, October 1944 – February 1945, IRIS No. 00101315,00101316,00101319,00101320, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

¹⁰ History of Air Force 96th Air Service Group History, October 1944 – February 1945, IRIS No. 00101315,00101316,00101319,00101320, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

1000th Signal Company

The 1000th Signal Company was detached but they performed in an outstanding manner establishing communications and handling the extraordinary volume of traffic - abnormal for an all-Black unit and exceptional in that, as the only American unit, Black or white in the area, they supported all regional Allied forces. The unit demonstrated an extraordinary ability to string wire and maintain communications with higher headquarters. Remarkably, the 1000th was able to maintain 100% communication with higher headquarters and its supporting unit.

Table 3: Results of one-service in Italy.

1000th Signal Company Service Group (AVN)	Jesi Italy
Local calls	1,591 calls
Long Distance Calls	2,030 long distance calls
Radio Messages	710
Outgoing messages	713
Incoming	638
Repair Section	
VHF set repaired	13
Command set	6
Aircraft repaired	4

Source: History of Air Force 96th Air Service Group History, October 1944 – February 1945, IRIS No. 00101315,00101316,00101319,00101320, in the USAF Collection, AFHRA.

Logistical support is where the Americans excelled beyond all other armies. Other Allied and Axis forces could criticize how American fought tactically, but they stood in awe of American logistics which delivered tons of

¹¹ David P. Colley, *The Road to Victory: The Untold Story of World War II's Red Ball Express* , 161.

materiel to hundreds of thousands of troops over dangerous rugged terrain. Historian Martin Van Creveld remarked that, in modern warfare, logistics comes close to being everything.

Logistics make up as much as nine tenths of the business of war, and....the mathematical problems involved in calculating the movements and supply of armies are, to quote Napoleon, not unworthy of a Leibnitz or a Newton. As a great modern soldier (A.C.P. Wavell) has said: The more I see of war, the more I realize how it all depends on administration and transportation...It takes little skill or imagination to see where you would like your Army to be and when; it takes much knowledge and hard work to know where you can place your forces and whether you can maintain them there. A real knowledge of supply and movement factors must be the basis of every leader's plan; only then can he know how and when to take risks with those factors, and battle are won only by taking risks.¹²

The 96th Air Service Squadron employed capable and proven men who did a awe-inspiring job in maintaining, repairing, and keeping planes in the air in their effort to defeat Axis forces. In a post-World War II assessment, the Army admitted that the over 500,000 Black troops who served during the war were largely ignored, and the prime reason was that they served in service units that were never reported on or written about compared to the combat units.

General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.; praised these men for their contribution to the war effort. After the war, when an investigation was being made to evaluate Blacks for post-war service, General Parrish [white] reported that, "all of the mechanical work at Tuskegee was done by Black mechanics without the help or supervision from white mechanics and likewise all of the administrative work was done by Blacks."¹³ General Davis stated, "I had a good group of enlisted men to work with me throughout the war. They all knew their jobs and gave their best. When it was decided to integrate the services, I had no trouble finding jobs for the enlisted technicians and mechanics. I received

¹² David P. Colley, *The Road to Victory: The Untold Story of World War II's Red Ball Express*, 207.

¹³ 1LT Charles E. Francis, *Tuskegee Airmen; The Men Who Changed A Nation* (Boston, MA; Branden Brooks publishing Co., Inc 2008), 108.

more requests for them than I could supply.”¹⁴ Despite the relative lack of recognition, the contribution of the 96th to the war effort was extensive. The entire quantity of work performed by the units of the 96th Air Service Squadron, often operating on ‘round the clock schedules, was tremendous. The untold achievements were so large and significant that they cannot be lightly dismissed. In the end, the story of the 96th is documented in unit history files and by word of mouth among the men who served there, but little has been written on their contribution to airpower.

¹⁴ 1LT Charles E. Francis, *Tuskegee Airmen; The Men Who Changed A Nation*, 315.

CHAPTER 5

The Tuskegee Meteorologists

The law of sowing and reaping: Learning and mentoring yield a harvest of personal growth and organizational development.

-- Charles "Chief" Alfred Anderson

TUSKEGEE METEOROLOGIST

The relatively new science of aeronautics revolutionized the science of meteorology, one of mankind's oldest subjects of interest. Aviation both assisted and drove the advancement of meteorology. Commercial and military aviation required an increased ability to plan flying activities around favorable weather conditions, and a primitive forecast based on scattered ground observations and verified by the observation of a dawn patrol observation flight were insufficient to meet the need. Even apart from aviation requirements, public and business interests demanded more accurate forecasts to avoid losses in the fields of commercial fishing, shipping, transportation, agriculture, and recreation. Emergency planning for extreme weather phenomena such as tornadoes, blizzards, hurricanes, and severe thunderstorms also placed increasing demands on meteorologists.¹

Despite the increasing interest in meteorology, growth in civilian and military meteorological programs was slow prior to World War II. Developing academic programs to explore the science was expensive and the Great Depression did not make it easy. By 1937, there were only three American universities offering graduate meteorology degrees: Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech), and New York University. As the Army's primary user of meteorological services, the Air Corps had sent a handful of pilots to MIT and Cal Tech for graduate work in

¹ Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II* (Robins AFB, GA), 1.

meteorology.² The Army had only 62 qualified weather forecasters in July 1940, primarily in the Air Corps, of only an estimated 377 in the War Department. The rapid and projected growth of the Air Corps required a growing number of weather officers.³ The answer to this problem was to create training courses at several leading universities to mass produce weather officers. The Army Air Force (AAF) added the University of Chicago and University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) to meet the demand. By 1940, the AAF graduated 116 cadets, including several Navy officers. Wallace Patillo Reed, a University of New Hampshire mathematics graduate, became the first Black weather officer after graduating from MIT in 1941 and being

Picture 9 "Meteorologists Brief"
Source: USAF Collection. AFHRA.



commissioned in the Air Corps Weather Service on

14 February 1942.⁴ Second Lieutenant Reed was assigned as the Tuskegee base weather officer on 27 March 1942 after a three-week orientation at Michel Field on Long Island, New York. Except for an eleven-week absence to attend a meteorology refresher course at Chanute Field in Rantoul, IL in early 1945, Reed,

promoted to Captain in January 1944, served as Tuskegee's weatherman until the end of the war. Five enlisted weathermen who had trained at Chanute Field, joined him on 6 April 1942, the first of 40 who would serve there.⁵

The Tuskegee Weather Detachment was formed on 21 March 1942. Originally organized as part of the Tuskegee Army Flying School, it was located at the Tuskegee Army Airfield, Tuskegee, Alabama. As the only Black weather officer, Lieutenant Reed had the enormous task of building a weather

² Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*, 2.

³ Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*, 2.

⁴ Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*, 3.

⁵ Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*, 3.

detachment from scratch. The business of a base weather station is to collect, record, and report weather observations; to make forecasts; and to provide weather briefings for flying students and instructors. Lieutenant Reed had to perform all these tasks and train his staff with no help.⁶ There was no core of military experience or past schoolhouse training to build around, there were no Black Weather Bureau professional staffers who could be commissioned or enlisted for weather service, and no allowance was made for detailing Black civilian instructors. By 1943 the AAF added 14 new Black weather officers. Even in the Jim Crow environment of that era, Black meteorology cadets were fully integrated with white cadets at all program universities except for Cal Tech.⁷ More important, these small and incremental steps were significant in tearing the fabric of white supremacy. Over time, more Black weather officers were added to the rolls at Tuskegee, including men such as Lieutenants Paul F. Byrd, Benjamin F. Bullock, Horace M. King, Charles E. Anderson, M. Milton Hopkins from the University of Chicago and Roosevelt Richardson and Luther L. Blakeney from New York University. The last Black weather officers assigned to Tuskegee were Archie F. Williams from UCLA, assigned in 1943, and John T. Willis and Robert M. Preer from MIT. These officers were highly educated, with many having one or more degrees in science and mathematics. Once they arrived at Tuskegee, they underwent training focused on the military mission and then were assigned to a segregated combat unit.

⁶ Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*, 2.

⁷ Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*, 4.



Picture 10 Tuskegee Base Weather Office staff (mid-1944); front row: Lt Grant Franklin, Lt Archie Williams, Capt Wallace Reed, Lt John Branche, Lt Paul Wise and Lt Robert Preer. 2d row: William R. Pease, Harold Thomas, Charles E. Pratt, William Phillips, William K. Fleming, Charles A. Houston. 3d row, all unidentified. 4th row, Charles E. Pratt, Edmond D. Cooke, William K. G. Forde, other 2 unidentified. Top back; Homer B. Washington. Source: Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*.

Lieutenants Richardson, Byrd, Hopkins, and Bullock were assigned to the 332d Fighter Group in 1942. They arrived in Italy and drew assignments with the 100th, 301st, and 302d Fighter Squadrons, respectively. The function of a squadron weather officer was to brief their crews on target area and en-route weather based on information provided by the base weather station.⁸ Each weather officer had a small enlisted section. The enlisted men first learned mechanical skills and other general courses, then attended specialized weather observing and teletype maintenance courses. One of the war's heroes who helped the Tuskegee Airmen manage the weather throughout the war was John Branche, an accomplished forecaster, rated 46th among the top 100 AAF

⁸ Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*, 4.

forecasters (of more than 2000) during the war.⁹ Their outstanding performances earned many of the enlisted men the AAF Weather Observer Badge. These enlisted personnel were the driving force and heart and engine in helping the weather officers predict weather conditions for the air crews.

In retrospect, these meteorologists, like the rest of their Tuskegee peers, were pioneers. In joining the Army and becoming weather officers, a career choice unimaginable before WWII, they met the high entry standards and successfully completed the most academically rigorous course offered by the Army in WWII, a noteworthy achievement in its own right. From this group of 20, ten persevered to complete military careers as weather officers, despite slow-to-disappear prejudicial practices: perhaps their most enduring legacy. Their performance in one of the most technically demanding military career fields may have been, over the long haul, almost as significant as the combat record of the 332d Fighter Group. It helped lay to rest in all but the most bigoted minds any lingering doubts about the ability of Blacks to successfully serve their country, laying a foundation for others to advance based on their technical skill and record of accomplishment, rather than being hindered by misperception based on race or skin color.

⁹ Gerald A. White, Jr., *Tuskegee Meteorologists in World War II*, 6.

Chapter 6

Aeromedical

Each of us saw in this situation a chance to be a doctor in a world of our own. We all were sure that we “had what it takes” and were confident in our ability to take care of any emergency that might arise.

Vance H. Marchbanks, Jr.

The First Negro Flight Surgeon in the World

Until the formation of the Tuskegee flying units, all US Army flight surgeons were white. The few standard aeromedical histories that describe the pre-war years say nothing about Black flight surgeons being trained, although at least three Tuskegee Army Air Field medical officers, Vance H. Marchbanks, Jr., Maurice C. Johnson, and James P. Ramsey became Aviation Medical Examiners (AME) as the war began.¹ Blacks who pursued higher education during the first decades of the twentieth century generally attended one of the historically Black colleges or universities. The lawyers, educators, ministers, physicians, and other professionals graduating from those schools developed a close-knit intellectual society with strong internal bonds. In the mid-1930s most influential Blacks knew each other personally either through activism, education, or business. Black labor unions were strong. Black medical students trained at Meharry or Howard and took internships and residencies under their auspices. This shared educational background laid the cultural foundation from which the Tuskegee flight surgeons would arise.² During the interwar period, the Army consisted of a small cadre of white Army officers and men. During the years of the Depression, some college students, Black and white, received their tuition from the Army through the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Upon graduation, they became commissioned officers. Many of these commissions placed them in the Infantry for specified obligatory periods

¹ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons* (Montgomery, Ala, 2006), 33.

² David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 23-24.

in the Inactive Reserve during which they could be called to active duty. Even though former ROTC students in the Reserves later attended graduate schools, including medical schools, they would serve as Infantry officers unless the Army transferred them to the Medical Corps. As plans for the flying training base and pursuit squadron at Tuskegee took form, it became clear that non-flying Black officers would be needed in support roles, and that some of these would come from the reserve forces. Individual reserve officers, such as physicians not called for specialized duty, would be vulnerable for active duty in non-medical fields. The AAF had neither Black flight surgeons nor any aviation medical technicians or clerks to support them. The Black medical officers were non-existent in 1940, and there was a great deal of resistance to taking Black field medics into the Army as doctors, and very strong resistance to taking them into Army hospitals to practice their specialties. Who would furnish aeromedical care to Black fliers?³

The School of Aviation Medicine at Randolph Field, Texas graduated 490 flight surgeons between 1919 and the summer of 1940. During that period, another 67 physicians had taken a home study extension course developed by the School.⁴ Their home instruction was then augmented by practical work done at Army airfields near their homes under the supervision of experienced flight surgeons. Although not specified in the official histories of any Tuskegee units, it is likely that a civilian Aviation Medical Examiner from the Civil Aviation Agency (CAA; today the FAA) had certified the physical fitness of each volunteer upon application for the Civilian Pilot Training Program as part of his acceptance into flying training. However, these private physicians did not furnish clinical services or “sick call” to the various schools in the CAA program. Tuskegee Army Air Field north of town would require a full Army Medical Detachment, a Station Hospital, and the military flight surgeons

³ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 25.

⁴ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 33.

necessary to manage medical, aeromedical, and preventive medical programs for the newly appointed cadets arriving at Tuskegee.

Captain Maurice E. Johnson, the first Black Air Corps physician assigned to the new Army Flying Training Detachment (FTD) at Tuskegee, arrived at the Institute in January 1941. Johnson provided all initial medical services to the military cadre and the newly appointed cadets as they entered training.⁵ An experienced Air Corps pilot and instructor, Johnson graduated from Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. Going on to Howard University, he received his A.B. in 1926 and his M.D. in 1930. Dr. Johnson interned at the Freedman's Hospital, Washington, D.C., in 1930-1931, remaining there to serve as a clinical assistant through 1935. He maintained a private practice in nearby Rockville, MD, until he took a post as an assistant physician at the Lakin State Hospital in West Virginia from 1936-1940. His Officer Reserve Corps date of commission into the Medical Corps was 1 January 1941, eleven months before Pearl Harbor. Dr. Johnson's initial Army assignment as an Aviation Medical Examiner (AME) at Tuskegee in January 1941 indicates that he obtained his training through the flight surgeon correspondence course program, since no Black physicians entered the School of Aviation Medicine until January 1943. Captain Marchbanks was another officer who was instrumental in supporting the airmen. Upon arriving at Tuskegee, Vance Marchbanks volunteered to take the School of Aviation Medicine extension course. Completing his studies, Marchbanks became an AME at Tuskegee on 19 Dec 1942 and received promotion to the rank of captain on 16 January 1943. He served with the instructor pilots and cadets at the Flying Training Detachment until his reassignment to the 332nd Fighter Group at Tuskegee Army Air Field on 26 August 1943.⁶

⁵ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 50.

⁶ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 50.

In the autumn of 1942 Judge Hastie, the Assistant for Negro Affairs to the Secretary of War, asked the AAF about training flight surgeons by correspondence. The AAF at first replied that the great bulk of aviation medicine trainees, both Negro and white students, were using extension courses and branch schools. When Hastie asked specifically if Negroes were excluded from Randolph Field's medical courses, an evasive answer came back: "It is not the policy of the Air Corps to exclude Negro officers from training at the School of Aviation Medicine." Hastie raised such questions about other technical training schools, such as the Officer Candidate School at Miami Beach and the recently-formed segregated Officer Candidate School at Jefferson Barracks in Missouri. He also objected to the "humiliating and morale shattering mistreatment at Tuskegee," such as that earlier reported to him by Chauncey Spencer, and continued by such policies as separate Black and white messes, toilets, and officers' calls.⁷ A particularly sore point was that Black military police could not carry side arms. Hastie also determined that Black medical officers did not receive equivalent training to the whites, whether at the School of Aviation Medicine or in the practical phase of the extension course given by mail.

With this and other discriminatory issues impeding Blacks in the military, Judge Hastie submitted his resignation, emphasizing the AAF's actions had been "so objectionable and inexcusable that I have no alternative but to resign in protest and to give public expression to my views." Hastie then began a well-publicized campaign to end military discrimination. Major General George E. Stratemeyer, AAF Chief of Staff, answered, "I don't want any colored school any place to be conducted as a segregated school. With reference to colored Officer Candidates at Miami Beach, I want them treated

⁷ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*. (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1986). 35-36.

just like white Officer Candidates. They will go to the same classes, to the same drills, and eat in mess halls the same as the whites.”⁸

Hastie’s inquiries and Stratemeyer’s directives led to action. The AAF acknowledged some of its failings, adding that the training of Black flight surgeons through a correspondence course rather than at Randolph “constituted undesirable discrimination.”⁹ Three Black flight surgeons graduated from the extension course and an accompanying practical course in February 1943, and, in a little-noticed but historic moment, two physicians stationed at Tuskegee—Harold E. Thornell and Bascom S. Waugh—were accepted at the School of Aviation Medicine for an integrated military training course that same month.¹⁰

Dr. Johnson was assigned directly as flight surgeon for the Advanced Training School and the Flying Training Detachment (FTD). This arrangement reflected the Medical Corps policy of having a unit flight surgeon responsible to his line commander—Captain Parrish, in this instance—rather than to a local medical commander. Soon after the FTD began operations in June 1941, orders appointed Parrish, Johnson, and Magoon to be the Detachment’s Academic Board. These three officers also constituted the Aircraft Accident Board. This was the first time that a Black Medical Corps officer had served with white Air Corps officers in this capacity. As flight surgeon of the FTD, Johnson participated in the Academic Board’s assessment of a student’s capacity, motivation, and general fitness to continue his training. In the event of an aircraft mishap, the Accident Board would determine the probable cause;

⁸ Alan Osur M, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations*, 36.

⁹ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons* (Montgomery, Ala, 2006), 33.

¹⁰David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 33.

pilot error, mechanical failure, improper training, weather, runway conditions, or tower instructions, e.g. Considering the rather primitive conditions of the dirt landing strip and roads at Moton Field, the uncertainty of communication and transportation, and the medical responsibilities of flying operations, which included routine medical care, periodic physical examinations, board meetings, sanitary inspections, and other duties, there is little doubt that the doctor was a busy man.

Captain Johnson continued as the only flight surgeon assigned to the base. At the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the following organizations were active at Tuskegee: detachments of the Medical Corps, Signal Corps, and Quartermaster Corps, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, and the 66th Tuskegee Army Air Field Training Detachment. Captain Johnson provided sick call and flight line coverage at both fields, and cared for cadets and permanent party troops on the campus. Although a Station Hospital was part of the planned Army Air Field ten miles to the north, its construction had not yet begun. Fitness to fly involved more than just normal physical and mental abilities: not every healthy person could fly military aircraft in overseas combat for a year. Along with the instructors, the flight surgeon had official responsibilities concerning the motivation, ability, mental stability, hardiness, and resilience required of a combat aviator. Faculty members and the flight surgeon made careful subjective judgments about each student's readiness to progress through the successive training courses, and lack of one or more of the necessary qualities could lead to an Academic or Flying Evaluation Board and perhaps to termination of training—"washing out."

Following ground school, the cadets took a 28-day flight line course given four miles south of the Institute at Kennedy Field, referred to as Field No. 1 after construction began at Field No. 2, Moton Field. Twelve flight instructors, some Black and some white, gave the courses, performed inspections, and drilled cadets about "the ignition and functioning of engines, use of controls, taxiing, takeoffs, safety precautions and flight patterns" as well as aircraft line

inspection, light maintenance and Civil Air Regulations.¹¹ Ten hours of Flight Orientation taught basic flight maneuvers and, supported by Dr. Johnson's aeromedical experience, helped students surmount "the hurdles of airsickness, fear of flight, lack of ability to take orders, lack of confidence, etc."¹² When the flight line opened at Moton Field in August 1941, Johnson not only provided flight line sick call but also assumed supervision of the stand-by crash ambulance during active flying periods. The driver and technician manned a civilian ambulance provided by the Institute until an Army ambulance arrived in November. Its requisition took much time and administrative effort, as did all supplies and equipment ordered for Tuskegee during these early months.

The permanently assigned Army cadre and the cadets received medical care from dispensaries located on the campus of the Tuskegee Institute. Construction of the Army Air Field, with its three runways, proceeded through 1942 and into 1943. The new army post included a Station Hospital to furnish inpatient and outpatient ward facilities, clinics, and ancillary medical services to all flying and non-flying military personnel and to some family members. The hospital was a part of the TAAF Base Unit, located about ten miles north of the town of Tuskegee and seven miles northwest of Moton Field. Hospital buildings were positioned several hundred yards from the new flight line. Beginning with one or two small structures, the complex added many buildings during early 1943: separate wooden one-story wards, a laboratory, surgical suites, and administrative offices. These buildings were made in the standard Army cantonment style: simply constructed, long and narrow parallel one-story wooden frame structures painted flat white. Each building stood about fifty feet from the others, spacing that diminished the chance that a fire or an enemy attack might damage more than one ward. Covered walkways with open

¹¹ U.S. Air Force. *History of 320th AAF College Training Detachment (Aircrew), Tuskegee AAF*. January 1943 – January 1944. Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Historical Research Agency. File 234.821, IRIS 00151186.

¹² U.S. Air Force. *History of 320th AAF College Training Detachment (Aircrew), Tuskegee AAF*. January 1943 – January 1944. Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Historical Research Agency. File 234.821, IRIS 00151186.

sides connected the wards and offices, giving some protection from sun or rain to staff and patients traveling from one location to another. Cantonment construction was designed for use at permanent posts and airfields in the United States and overseas.

Although the cadets and cadre lived on or near the campus, the first enlisted troops staffing the hospital lived with other new arrivals under field conditions in two-man pup tents. “Field conditions” meant amenities such as open-air lines for meals at field kitchens and canvas Lyster water bags instead of faucets. The first ‘toilets’ were open-air straddle latrines—simple trenches surrounded by vertical canvas curtain walls—that were soon replaced by latrines inside tents covering individual or multiple boxes with wooden toilet seats. Progressive construction provided larger tents and then permanent facilities as time passed. This early experience proved to have training value in matters of field sanitation for those who later served in the Mediterranean theater, and especially for the medical troops responsible for measures affecting sanitation and preventive medicine.

AMEs from the Tuskegee Station Hospital rotated between the hospital Flight Surgeons Office and the flight lines at Moton, Kennedy, and Tuskegee Army Air Fields, keeping physicians current in both inpatient and outpatient care. Flight line dispensaries furnished crash ambulance coverage for flying activities and sick call services for minor medical complaints or injuries to enlisted troops working there. Students continued to meet flight standards and maintain daily fitness for flying training, taking into account any illnesses or injuries that required treatment. By mid-1943 the medical staff had access to the Station Hospital at Tuskegee AAF whenever extensive diagnostic procedures, outpatient consultation, or inpatient treatment became necessary.

Medical in Combat

At the beginning of the war, Army Air Forces regulations concerning flight surgeon support to fighter groups placed most aeromedical personnel at squadron level. The Table of Organization and Equipment (TO/E) for a typical fighter squadron would include one flight surgeon (usually a captain) and

about eight enlisted medical technicians, a dispensary tent, and one or two ambulances. Medical support to a fighter group headquarters section under this system consisted of one medical officer (possibly a major) and three or four enlisted technicians.

The 332nd Group Medical Detachment received the organizational plan for combat. The 332nd Fighter Group's Aid Station was among the first to reorganize according to the Air Surgeon's new TO/E for Aid Stations. In accordance with Army Regulation 40-210, a flight surgeon was assigned by name to each squadron for care of its fliers, and each flight surgeon had an enlisted technician. Although the total number of medical personnel remained about the same, the regulation reassigned most medical resources from individual squadrons to the Group Medical Detachment. The centralized 332nd Group Aid Station now consisted of the Group Surgeon, a dental surgeon, a medical administrative officer, and 22 enlisted men: medical technicians, clerks, and ambulance drivers. The basic physical assets for the medics included three ward tents and one walled tent. The Group had its medical staff in place for operational duty in the combat zone. By 1943, the 332nd Fighter Group boarded troop trains from Selfridge, Michigan, to Hampton, Virginia, to load on troopships bound for combat. The medical task organization consisted of flight surgeons Captain Vance Marchbanks as the Group Surgeon, Captain Bascom Waugh with the 100th Fighter Squadron, Captain Harry Anderson with the 301st Fighter Squadron, and Captain Arnold Maloney with the 302nd Fighter Squadron. These medical officers and enlisted men were serious about their opportunity to perform their duty against Nazism and to bring down the walls of racism in support of their country. Captain Vance Marchbanks eloquently wrote on the eve of their deployment:

Picture 11 "Dentist" Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



Last minute immunizations and screening of personnel. In spite of the cold winter days and restrictions during the holidays, morale was high. It was that way because many of us had been together a long time, and some of us had been acquainted since childhood. We were all fighting for a common cause and we were suffering with the same problems. It was Christmas time and we were on the way to parts unknown. On New Year's Day 1944 we were still in the staging area. 2 January 1944 found the group and all the squadrons waiting for "Z" hour. Orders were received late in the day that all personnel would be ready to clear the staging area before the break of dawn. Equipment was to consist of full pack and the old horseshoe roll of shelter half and blankets.¹³

Marchbanks rotated the required additional duties of Medical Officer of the Day (MOD) and Alert Medical Officer on the Flying Line among his three junior flight surgeons, commenting that each of the two duties "requires only a few hours of their time." Under his system, he and two squadron flight surgeons would provide medical care at the Group Air Station. The other flight surgeon served a full 24 hour tour as the MOD to provide necessary sick call coverage at night, when much of the aircraft maintenance and armament loading took place to prepare the planes for the next day's missions. Having a physician immediately available near the flight line for minor ailments and injuries meant less time lost from the job for essential personnel, as well as being an element of morale enhancement. The Group Aid Station policies called for a medical technician in an ambulance to be on the flight line for emergency coverage at all times. Second ambulances, manned by a flight surgeon and medic/driver, were present whenever 332nd aircraft were taking off or landing. The other ambulances were kept at the Aid Station, on standby for patient transport or flight line backup. The MOD would become the "Alert Medical Officer" the next day, relieved of clinic duties but providing flight line coverage during takeoffs and landings. He was otherwise off duty.

Medical care given at the Group Aid Section resembled that of a general medical practice, including internal medicine, surgery, care of venereal diseases, and neuropsychiatry. All four medical officers shared these clinical

¹³ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 105.

duties. “The best advantage has been in caring for the pilots,” wrote Marchbanks, “thus returning them to flying as quickly as possible, and avoiding their exposure to psycho-somatic influences that are contagious to susceptible individuals in hospitals.”¹⁴ These comments reflect Marchbanks’ month of neuropsychiatric training at Walter Reed Army Hospital in 1942, training far in excess of that offered through Army flight surgeon courses. His approach to the problems of flying fatigue and symptoms of anxiety reflected the emerging doctrine of experienced Army psychiatrists Doctors Roy Grinker and John Spiegel, supporting the AAF during the North African campaign, who later published what they had learned in a book that would become a classic, *Men Under Stress*.

Captain Marchbanks performed the prescribed duties of his medical command position in addition to his clinical responsibilities, giving lectures on base sanitation and general health, serving as Venereal Disease Control Officer, and being a member of Accident Boards and Court-Martial Boards. In common with all AAF flight surgeons, the doctors of the 332nd lectured their new pilots about first aid and self-care, oxygen use and discipline, sanitation, and problems of living under field conditions in Italy upon their arrival in the Group. Flying small fighter aircraft at high altitudes for hours presented other problems to the pilots, such as recurrent middle ear blockages and infections from repeated sudden changes in cabin air pressures due to changes in altitude, chronic physical and mental fatigue from the unending combat missions, and even mundane cockpit working conditions. The cockpit heating system vented into the cabin on the right side, and Marchbanks reported that the distance from that vent to the other side of the pilot’s seat had resulted in three cases of left-foot frostbite.

Under medical supervision, all troops instituted anti-malarial control measures similar to those of North Africa: mosquito netting, elimination of standing waterholes, long-sleeved clothing, and preventive medications such as

¹⁴ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 109.

quinine or Atabrine. Troops also received indoctrination on drinking water discipline because of the shortage of potable water sources, and the doctors gave briefings on the proper use of field latrines and on other matters of sanitation. Such matters may seem trivial until one considers the possibility of contagious dysentery and other intestinal diseases among thousands of troops living in tents pitched in constant mud and rain. .

The three squadrons of the 332nd flew about 1200 hours per month on 750 missions. Under the strain of supporting this robust flying schedule in support of the 12th Air Force combat mission, illness also took its toll. Flight surgeons of the 332nd responded to emergencies when necessary, and continued their routine duties, familiar due to stateside experiences. Marchbanks, serving on Accident Boards and Flying Evaluation Boards, could see the effects of continuous combat flying on the pilots. Flight surgeons of the 8th AF in England had demonstrated the value of rest camps in relieving the chronic fatigue of fliers by allowing them uninterrupted sleep, good food, and recreation; hence the term “Rest and Recreation” or “R & R.” Nine days away from duty seemed to give the most benefit in restoring “zest for flying” with one’s comrades. Experience showed that any more time off allowed a pilot to develop emotional separation from the unit, which was detrimental to its mission. Because segregation policies and social customs prohibited off-duty mixing of races, a “rest camp for colored fighter pilots” was opened near Naples on 7 April 1944. Pilots from the 99th Squadron and 332nd Group could go there for three days if they had been flying convoy point patrol missions, and for seven days if they had been flying strafing or bomber escort missions. Captain Marchbanks stated in his need to keep airmen from extreme fatigue that “it has been a uniform observation that pilots returning from the rest camp displayed an improved zest for flying.”¹⁵ Monthly rosters scheduled groups of six to ten pilots for this camp; although brief review of these rosters seems to indicate that only three or so 332nd pilots were actually off base at any one time.

¹⁵ David R. Jones, Leroy C. Gross, and Roslyn Marchbanks-Robinson, *U.S. Army Aeromedical Support to African American Fliers, 1941-1949 The Tuskegee Flight Surgeons*, 111.

Marchbanks, a career army officer and physician, wrote his Medical History for the official record in careful prose that rarely included personal comments. In contrast, men in each squadron's intelligence section wrote daily diaries from which the official monthly squadron reports were later compiled. In addition to combat flying operations, these lively informal documents describe everyday life in the tent cities and include matters concerning morale and health issues.

Picture 12" Doctors at Work" Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.

In a larger sense, the work of the Tuskegee flight surgeons reflects the role of Black medical practice and the entire historically Black educational system during the Jim Crow era of legal and social segregation. Those who thought the training of Negro flight surgeons required only an extension course lost their case due to the activism of Hastie and Stratemeyer. As a result, the development of flight surgeons among Negro Medical Officers has had its inception and development at Tuskegee Army Air Field. Some 15 members of the medical staff had successfully completed the course at the School of Aviation Medicine, Randolph Field, Texas, by war's end. There had been no failures; all had good records. Five Medical Officers completed correspondence courses at the School and later received their Flight Surgeon ratings: all of these men served at Tuskegee Army Air Field and due credit should be given for the excellent job they did as Flight Surgeons. The success of the entire training program was due in no small degree to the abilities, interests, and conscientious efforts of the flight surgeon staff, and Black pilots flying fighter planes through Alabama skies rapidly began to symbolize the efforts of Black citizens to become full participants in the war against the Axis powers.



Chapter 7

The 332nd Fighter Group

*Combat Power for America-Right Here, Right Now
Tuskegee Airmen....The legend Continues.*

-- 332d Air Expeditionary Wing Motto



To complete this rich history of the men who supported the famed Tuskegee Airmen and contribute to airpower, it would be irresponsible to not mention one of the fighter groups. This chapter is intended to be brief to ensure the theme of this paper remains focused on the support service airmen who kept the famed aviators in the air. Much has already been written about the Tuskegee Airmen, and the brevity of this chapter takes nothing away from their contributions and sacrifices by shining the spotlight for a moment on the ones who kept them flying. The 332nd Fighter Group is the best exemplar because its legacy is still seen today in the battlefields of Iraq. The 332nd Fighter Group is known today as the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing.

In 2001, the 332d Air Expeditionary Wing participated in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The Group's played a critical role in the defeat of the Taliban and provided key air support for ground forces. When Operation Iraqi Freedom kicked off in 2003, the Group played a strategic role in providing airpower to coalition forces. Today the Group is operating out of the Joint Base Balad, Iraq, and is the most forward deployed Air Force wing operating in Iraq.

THE RED TAILS

The 332nd Fighter Group legacy began in Tuskegee but later transferred to Selfridge, Michigan. The group consisted of the 100th, 301st, and 302nd squadrons. The 99th Squadron was added in theater in July 1944. The training held at Selfridge was advanced training in order to prepare the 332nd for combat. After nine months of intense training, the 332nd sailed for three weeks with the first elements landing in Taranto, Italy. Upon arrival the 332nd

moved by truck to Montcorvino and Naples and began supporting the ground troops fighting in the Anzio area. Their immersion in the fires of combat was immediate, much like that of the 99th, which fought in North Africa before being added as a fifth squadron. No battle has been fought without casualties, and the battle waged by the 332nd as soon as their planes lifted off was no exception. In spite of the casualties suffered by the 332nd, it effectively carried out its assignment of coastal patrol dive-bombing and strafing in support of ground troops fighting near Rome. The 332nd worked around the clock for 15th Air Force, and it was the men of the 96th Air Service Group who kept the 332nd in the air. While the 332nd was fully engaged in the Italian campaign, it was also taking part in the Allied Air Forces offensive against German oil supply centers.

As one of seven fighter groups in 15th Air Force, the 332nd moved to Ramitelli and began their bomber escort mission. The 332nd Fighter Group flew over 200 bomber escort missions. The airmen faced the best the Luftwaffe had to offer, and earned from the Hun the sobriquet "Black Bird Men." The 332nd became the first Italy-based fighter unit to escort B-17s all the way to Berlin and back; facing numerous German Me-109 and FW-190 fighters en route. One example of the 332nd's success was withdrawal escort for bombers in the 15th's first mission to the Brux oil refineries in Bohemia. The 332nd also escorted bombers to the famous Ploesti oil fields. The mission was successful, but on the return Captain Walker, the flight leader, was shot down over the center of Yugoslavia. Like many pilots on similar missions, he made the mistake of flying over a small town which looked harmless but in fact had formidable AA defenses. Walker's plane was so severely damaged that he was forced to bail out. He landed in friendly territory and was taken to an underground hideout by some friendly peasants. A few days later, he joined a crew of nine white airmen who also had been shot down. After remaining in the hideout a short while, Captain Walker and the other airmen started out

together for their respective bases.¹ They covered 300 miles, over rough and mountainous country, wading through snow and water, before they received transportation from the 96th to their bases. This is one example of how the 96th was instrumental in retrieving and returning downed pilots.

In World War II the United States was not alone in training Black military pilots. There were Blacks flying in the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). They came from the West Indies, Africa, and Canada. When Black American soldiers saw these airmen and spoke to them, because they replied in English the soldiers thought they were members of the 332nd. Whether members of the 332nd, the RAF, or the RCAF, these Black airmen demonstrated exceptional prowess in flight. Unique among the three groups, only the 332nd made history by fighting two wars while being subjected to prejudices and racial hatred in the country it fought to protect.

Wherever the 15th AF's bombers flew, the 332nd was there to protect the B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators. Along with the bombers, the infantry loved having the Red Tails conduct close air support because when they bombed, they didn't bomb short and they flew down low to cut the path for ground soldiers.² During a twelve-day period in 1944, the Red Tails shot down 38 German fighters.³ The 332nd soon faced the German ME-262, whose turbojet engine and top speed of 540 mph put a heavy toll on bomber formation. They developed tactics taking advantage of the P-51's ability to recover from a dive faster than the German ME-262, and of the P-51's better maneuverability. By exploiting the weaknesses of the German aircraft, tacticians enabled the 332nd to destroy more German planes. Additionally, the 332nd pilots exhibited strict discipline: no pilot was allowed to leave the

¹ 1LT Charles E. Francis, *Tuskegee Airmen; The Men Who Changed A Nation* (Boston, MA; Branden Brooks publishing Co., Inc 2008), 126.

² Mary Penick Motley, *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II* (Detroit, Wayne State University, 1975), 234.

³ John B. Holway, *Red Tails, Black Wings: The Men of America's Black Air Force* (New Mexico, Yucca Tree Press, 1997) 218.

bombers unprotected to chase enemy aircraft. Because of their strict formation and attention to detail, the bombers destroyed more targets on the ground.

Black pilots were always proving themselves and conducting missions that other pilots could not achieve because of enemy defenses. For example, other flying squadrons kept missing a particular bridge due to heavy fire, evidenced by holes in aircraft fuselages, wings, tails, and all over. They would explain in the unsuccessful mission that they did not want the ground crews to get lazy, but the problem was that the pilots did not get down low enough due to the defensive fire protecting the bridge. The 332nd went in and destroyed the bridge while trumpeting “if the white pilots could not take the bridge out, we knew we would if we had to sit on the damn

thing.”⁴ This was an example of Black pilots conducting suicide missions in order to fight the racist perception about Black servicemen. If all things were equal, it would be safe to say that Black pilots would not have taken this dangerous risk of life and equipment of well defense targets.

Picture 13 “Airmen” Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



The 332nd Fighter Group shot down 111 enemy aircraft and destroyed another 150 on the ground, while never losing a friendly bomber to enemy fighters. They also knocked out more than 600 railroad cars and sank one destroyer and 40 boats and barges. Moreover, they destroyed or damaged countless amounts of materiel within enemy territory. Their success was not without heartache and a heavy price: they had 66 pilots killed in action and over 30 pilots captured and held as prisoners of war. Tuskegee Airmen George Iles stated “if you talk to other Black prisoners of war, we all mention the same thing: We had been segregated all along in the Air Force. Prison camp was our first experience in

⁴ Mary Penick Motley, *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II*, 235.

the military of being non-segregated. The Germans treated us just like any other American pilot. It was ironic: You had to get shot down to be treated equal.”⁵ These great men earned the Presidential Unit Citation and nearly nine hundred other combat awards, including one Legion of Merit, one Silver Star, ninety-five Distinguished Flying Cross, eight Purple Hearts, two Soldier Medals, and 744 Air Medals.

The accomplishment of the men of the 332nd Fighter Group helped change a nation. The 332nd fought hard to win the respect they deserved, then fought hard to win the war, earning a unique place in history in spite of the incredible challenges they faced. Rightfully, the legacy of the 332nd lives on in an active combat unit with its own unique challenges to overcome.

Picture 14” Black Airmen” Source: USAF Collection, AFHRA.



⁵ John B. Holway, *Red Tails, Black Wings: The Men of America's Black Air Force* (New Mexico, Yucca Tree Press, 1997) 257.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

“Combat was not easy, but you could only get killed once. Living with the day-to-day degradation of racism was far more difficult.”

-- Tuskegee Airmen Benjamin O. Davis Jr.

The record of the all-Black flying units during World War II was unblemished, although there were whites in the military and civilian leadership who did everything possible to keep African-Americans from realizing their full potential. The Tuskegee Experience proved without a doubt that Black pilots were capable not only of training in sophisticated airplanes but were more than capable of performing admirably in combat. Moreover, it was the service support units who risked their lives moving supplies throughout dangerous roads and working around clock to ensure planes kept flying. The “separate but equal” policy proved too difficult for the Army to maintain while fighting a war. Separation during war was impossible. How can one isolate a combat unit employed in the war effort? Black leaders challenged this notion and clearly pointed out the disparity between Jim Crow and Uncle Sam in the combat environment. Segregation is excluded because in a fight, different units carrying out different assignments, both tactical and strategic, rely and depend on the other, making true segregation in the air or on the ground a practical impossibility.¹ When bad weather forced a flight of twenty B-24s to make an unscheduled stop at Ramitelli in December 1944, the flight’s all white crewmembers became the guests of the 332nd Fighter Group. Bad weather prevailed for a number of days, and the 200 additional airmen created a cramped and close quarters situation. Colonel Benjamin Davis recalled “They enjoyed their stay and learned that in matters of humanity, we were not any different from them.”²

¹ Randy Johnson, *From Cubs to Hawks: The Story of the Aircraft, Airfields, and Training of the Tuskegee Airmen* (Eastern National, 2005), 54.

² Randy Johnson, *From Cubs to Hawks: The Story of the Aircraft, Airfields, and Training of the Tuskegee Airmen* , 54.

One thing that all Black pilots and supporting airmen felt is the need to prove themselves, not to be good but to be better. The service crews worked twice as hard and around the clock with limited resources. They overcame supply shortages by being innovative with scrap material. Black pilots did not have replacements and many times they flew sixteen straight missions in a row. Some Black airmen felt that a few of their men died because they were exhausted and were thus a split-second off in the crucial moment. Even though they felt they did their very best and had served their country with honor and distinction, they were quickly reminded by the reaction upon their return to United States that the color of their skin still mattered. Their indignation was intensified by the contrast between how their country treated German prisoners of war and how they were treated. The Germans earned 80 cents a day paid in Post Exchange chits that they could use to purchase food and other items. Enemy prisoners ate in the Exchange cafeteria, while the Black Airmen who fought those two wars were forbidden to eat there because of their color.³

We were combat flight instructors, veterans who had already fought Germans overseas and had lost comrades killed by the enemy and WE WERE INSULTED AND HUMILIATED IN OUR OWN NATIVE LAND!

- National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior

Because of their perseverance, they led changes in the integration of the Armed Services. The trail-blazers of the Tuskegee Airmen and their supporting servicemen, servicewomen, and civilians paved the way for the future of Black aviators who have since fought and served in five major wars since World War II. While the struggle for complete equality both inside and outside the military continues, the accomplishments of these Blacks have helped further democracy and freedom across the globe. The racial friction that had plagued the American military throughout its history has decreased, and Black and

³ Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly. *Black Knights: The Story of Tuskegee Airmen* (Gretna, LA, Pelican Publishing Company, 2001) 209.

white soldiers, airmen, sailors, marines who fought and died beside each other under the same condition and circumstances showed that they could easily live and work together in harmony. The Tuskegee experience in many aspects was the precursor of the Civil Rights Movement to come. The service support personnel were the heart of the Black Aviators. Both parties operated in a society that sought to deny them opportunities and keep them servitudes roles. The service support experiences pushed open the door of achievements that resulted in managing, building, and servicing everything from high tech aircraft, helicopters, balloons, satellites, space shuttles, and airports. One of enduring lessons during this time of uncertainty was it was impossible for the Army Air Corps to maintain separate training facilities that was reasonable and economically feasible. The bombardiers, navigators, crewman, aircraft mechanics, radio technicians, clerks, medical support personnel, meteorological support specialist, quartermaster specialists, and administrative staff gave the bombers and fighters unconditional support to achieve the unprecedented legacies of Bullard to the Red Tails. In summary, Americans need not look only to the past for knowledge of African American contributions, but can look at the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for a continuous of the proud heritage of an integrated force.

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